

Imaginative
Tales

AND

ACTION-PACKED SCIENCE FICTION

35¢

MARCH, 1956

ENEMY OF THE QUA

by Dwight V. Swain



Introducing the

AUTHOR

★
A. Bertram Chandler
★



I was born in the year 1912, in the maternity ward of the military hospital in Aldershot (an English garrison town) — my father being a professional soldier. My childhood years were more or less uneventful (although I still remember wrecking the kitchen as a result of an ill-advised experiment with explosives) and until the age of sixteen I was exposed to a normal lower middle class education,

most of which failed to catch. Having failed to matriculate (I should have been an industrial chemist had I done so) I was faced with the prospect of another year in the same form at school, so decided to go to sea as a cadet in a tramp steamer.

My years in tramp steamers were spent mainly on the Indian Coast, with occasional visits to
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MARCH 1956

Imaginative Tales

ALL STORIES
NEW AND
COMPLETE

William L. Hamling
Editor

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The Editorial.....

AS this issue goes on sale we've all been welcoming in the New Year. (Perhaps with a bit too much of a welcome!) Starting another year is always a big event. For a magazine such as TALES it's the start of a new challenge—to make the coming year even better than the last. And there's always room for improvement.

HOWEVER, that isn't what's been occupying our thoughts as we write this issue's editorial. Being science fiction enthusiasts we can't help but wonder if this is the year that will see man conquer space—or certainly make another big step in that direction.

WHAT did we accomplish last year toward that goal? Well, the single big thing that stands out above all others is the space station program now officially launched. You know, when you reflect upon it, at the beginning of last year any talk about a space station was just so much day-dreaming—science fiction at its ultimate. If you mentioned a space station at a mixed gathering (i. e., people other than science fiction enthusiasts) you got a polite but frosty—and somewhat speculative—look. As if to say, *you don't really believe that guff, do you?*

FUNNY how things change in the space of one short year. By

fall the government made its official announcement. Now the subject of space stations is commonplace. The same guy who gave with the frosty glance before is all of a sudden an authority on the subject. He, of course, knew it was coming all along!

THIS, of course is progress. We're glad to see it. And it makes the New Year a thing of portent. What will happen this year? The first rocket fired at the Moon?—Try springing that one on your friends. See what reaction you get. The frosty look and the speculative eye. For after all, to reach the moon means space flight, and even though we're going to put a station in an orbit high over the Earth, *anybody* knows we're *years* away from travelling through space! . . . Just like we were last year at this time in regard to a space station . . .

SO are we making a prediction? Frankly, we are. We think you'll be reading headlines before the year rolls out that a rocket has been successfully fired to the moon. It will probably be a one-way affair, plowing a nice-sized crater into that already pock-marked surface. But we think it will happen. Matter of fact, it's inevitable.

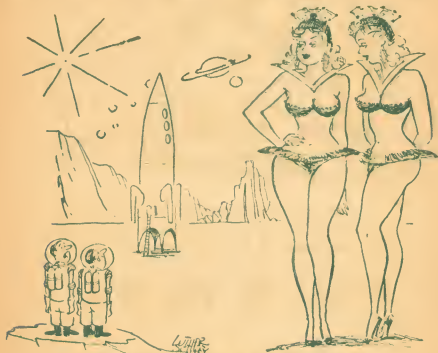
TROUBLE with most people today, as we see it, is that we're inclined to take our technological

advances with more than a few grains of salt. The impossible has been happening with such rapidity and consistency that it's hard to digest all at once. What should have been a development a century from now (nuclear fission) is a fact; what was the imaginative conjecture of the fiction writer (space stations) is now an active program; point is people don't seem to wish to look just beyond these achievements—extrapolating on what *must* follow.

NUCLEAR fission opens up the door to the powerplants of tomorrow. The internal combustion

engine will one day be consigned to the museum exhibits; rockets—even before they are fully developed—may prove to be ready for mothballs. Atomic power can easily put them both away. Yet how many people really believe it?

THE space stations—on the way—are our step-ladder to space. The jumping off point for manned rockets. Yet that sprinkling of salt keeps most people from giving it serious consideration. But watch that calendar of yours. Before the year ends you'll see the headline announcing a rocket hitting the moon. Happy New Year! . . . wh



"Wonder if they have time for a couple of short ones!"



Legend said the invaders were invincible, but Stark's blood ran hot with the freedom men of Earth cherished. So he risked sure death as an—

ENEMY OF THE QUA

by
Dwight V. Swain



THE basilisk-eyed Bherni guard had passed the hut now. Slowly, suspiciously, he moved on along the prison compound's inner wall, heavy-butted Talistan raygun poised and ready.

Still Stark sat motionless—head forward, shoulders slumped, a study in defeat.

The Bherni threw him one final,

contemptuous glance, then pivoted and disappeared beyond another, angling lump of shacks.

It carried the creature out of the guard-towers' view. Stiff-fingered, head pounding, Stark clawed the broken gear-bar from its hiding-place in the red Martian sand, and surged to his feet in one lithe motion. Jerkily, he tightened his belt;

slid the bar between it and his belly, out of sight beneath the rags that once had been his shirt.

Sweat ran into his eyes as he did it. Cursing the sun and Mars alike beneath his breath, he wiped the salty drops away. Then, once again, he forced himself into the role of sullen, broken prisoner and, shuffling from the open-fronted shack, drifted with apparent aimlessness along the same path the guard had followed.

Half a minute, it took him. Then he, too, was hidden from the guard-tower by the huts.

He paused, threw quick glances to right and left; strained his ears.

No sound came. He saw no one.

It brought a flicker of excitement, now confidence, to him: He'd been right; the timing was ideal. Only a fool or a broken man would stay in the heat of the huts at this hour.

And even fools and the broken left for food-call. This hell-hole's starvation rations made that certain.

So, the odds against immediate discovery were stacked on his side, at least a little.

He straightened; sucked in one quick breath. Then, cold-eyed, like a stalking sabar, he fell back to the stockade's wall and slid swiftly along it till he reached the nearest of the leantos behind which the

Bherni had vanished.

Ducking into the ramshackle structure's shadow, he peered warily around the corner.

Ahead, the Bherni had paused again, his back to the compound wall as he surveyed the area beyond him. A taloned finger hooked restlessly on the raygun's trigger.

But for Stark, it was as if the weapon did not exist. He had eyes only for the guard's other, lighter weapon: the xlan-tube in the belt-sheath.

The Bherni moved on again.

Cat-silent, Stark drew out the broken gear-bar: fourteen inches of greenish metal, half as thick as a man's wrist, with the club end still ugly and jagged where it had snapped from some machine.

The lethal weight of the thing felt good to him.

Because with luck, and for the right man, it could buy freedom.

Or death.

Death . . . Involuntarily, Stark's muscles tightened. He knew, of a sudden, that he dare not allow himself to think about it, even for an instant. Not here; not now.

Stooping swiftly, he scooped up a handful of reddish sand and pebbles and sprayed them across the roof of the hut that hid him.

THE sound of their striking was barely a whisper, but the

Bherni spun round like lightning. Basilisk eyes aglitter, he leaped away from the stockade wall, into the narrow slot between the two huts nearest him.

Stark struck a single muted drumbeat on the wall of the lean-to with the palm of his hand.

Down where the guard had disappeared, sand hissed faintly, as with the stealthy tread of great, taloned feet. Raw-nerved, Stark stepped quickly to a new position behind the lean-to.

Another wisp of sound, still muffled by distance. Gripping his gear-bar, Stark glided to the next shack in utter silence, then paused again, tautly listening.

But he could hear nothing. Frowning, every nerve on edge, he tip-toed to an adjoining hut.

As he reached it, tumult erupted: a rush of feet—the thud of a savage blow—a voice crying out, incoherent with shock and pain.

For a flashing, panicked moment, Stark went rigid. Then, rallying, he sprinted forward, racing towards the spot from which the noise had come.

Now, as he ran, more cries and thuds arose to guide him. Veering sharp left, he ran between two huts; came out into the space in front of them so fast he almost crashed into the guard.

The Bherni stood spraddle-leg-

ged, back to Stark, smashing down with his raygun's butt at a crumpled figure.

Spasmodically, Stark hurled himself forward. Pain shot up his arm as he lashed out with the gear-bar, clubbing at the base of the Bherni's spine.

An anguished bellow burst from the seven-foot monster's throat-sac. The creature lurched forward, stumbling over the prone figure of his erstwhile victim.

But he was whirling in the same instant; whipping round the raygun's muzzle.

Stark lunged in by sheer reflex. Savagely, he wrenched up the gear-bar, striking for the Bherni's eyes.

The bar missed, but his elbow connected. The great beaked head snapped back under the impact. The seven-foot body tottered, off balance.

Twisting, Stark brought the bar in backhand. With a surge of triumph, he saw the jagged end tear deep into the purplish tissue of his antagonist's throat-sac.

The Bherni's whole body jerked. He dropped the raygun. Talons raked bloody gashes along the left side of Stark's rib-cage.

Throwing himself flat, Stark struck for his adversary's brittle shinbones.

The right one shattered, with a

crack so loud that Stark could hear it. The guard pitched to the ground.

Barely in time, Stark rolled from beneath the toppling body. With all his strength and weight behind the blow, he smashed at the base of the Bherni's skull.

There was a splintering sound as the bar-end crushed in the horny casing. Purple jelly spurted. The Bherni writhed in a convulsive spasm, then lay still.

Stark lurched to his feet; but the sky swam around him. Shaking, panting, he sagged back against the wall of the hut. The gear-bar thudded to the red earth beside him, fallen from fingers all at once too weak to hold it. When he heard the voice, it seemed to come from afar off, a quavering echo of another world.

"Dead—!" the voice said. "A Bherni guard dead!" And then: "You fool, you fool!"

The spell that held Stark shattered. He spun round, fists clenching.

Staring up at him from the trampled dust in front of the hut crouched a man, a human, with blood-matted hair and a gaunt body dark-splotched with bruises.

Stark sagged back. "You're . . . the one he was giving the butt-stroke?"

"The butt-stroke——?" Incred-

ibly, the other smiled, a wry, pain-twisted smile. "Yes, I'm indeed the one."

He was old, Stark saw now; impossibly old for any prison compound, let alone this Martian hell-hole of the Qua. Dry skin stretched tight across the cheek-bones, almost translucent. The thin hair hung white where blood had not dyed it.

"What happened?" he asked quietly, after a moment.

The other shrugged. "I imagine you know as much as I do. I was staying in my hut, lying down, even though it was time for food-call—my stomach can't handle much of that appalling swill they give us, anyhow. The next thing I knew, that Bherni monster had jumped in and kicked me in the ribs. He seemed to think I'd been up to something, though he never did say what. When I tried to protest, he hit me in the head with his raygun. The butt-stroke, as you term it."

"I see."

"No doubt you're wondering why I don't thank you for saving me. And the answer is, I'm not too sure you've done me any favor." The pain-racked smile again. A bitterness, creeping into the thin, cultured voice: "You see, there'll be no escape from this. Not for long. The Qua prize their Bherni guards too

much for that. So I'm not at all certain that it wouldn't have been better to go out the other way. Another blow or two probably would have done it—"

ABRUPTLY, the old man broke off. "My apologies, good friend. This stockade has affected my sense of proportion, not to mention my manners. Your heart was right, and I do thank you. And now that the amenities are concluded, it might be advisable for us to scrape a hole for this monstrosity" — his gesture indicated the Bherni — "so that he's discovered no sooner than necessary."

As he spoke, the white-haired stranger began digging the sand away from beside the dead guard. Wordless, Stark fell to work beside him.

Ten minutes they labored, scooping out a shallow trough in complete silence. Then the old man said, "There's no point going deeper. They'll know he's missing by the end of the cycle, and after that it's just a matter of a few hours' search. Besides, our fellow-prisoners will begin drifting in shortly, and it wouldn't do to have them discover us still at this business."

Stark nodded without speaking. Squatting beside the Bherni, he took the xlan-tube from its sheath

and thrust it under his own belt, then heaved the corpse over into the makeshift grave. Tossing the raygun and gear-bar in on top of the body, he began pushing back the sand.

He had the taloned feet covered before it dawned on him that the old man was standing studying him instead of helping.

"Tired?" He tried not to let tension put harshness into his voice. "Maybe you ought to get over into the shade and sit down."

"Oh, no." The other shook his head. "Really, I feel very well, all things considered. It's just that I'm a bit curious."

"Curious—?"

"About the xlan-tube."

A tiny, uneasy spark crept through Stark. He made a business of keeping his eyes on the sand. "What about it?"

"Why did you take it?"

Stark finished covering the guard's knees. "You said yourself that they'd be dragging us out sometime next cycle. With the tube, I can make it cost them a few more Bherni."

"Yes, it's possible you might follow that line of reasoning." His companion smiled. "However, you'll pardon me if I remain a trifle skeptical."

Stark looked up sharply. "What do you mean?"

The other met his gaze head-on. "I mean it was no convenient accident that you happened along in time to save me, my friend. On the contrary. You set the whole miserable business in motion."

With an effort, Stark held his voice level. "Go on."

"You wanted a xlan-tube. Where else could you hope to get one but from a guard? So, you somehow obtained possession of a club, then followed the Bherni here to kill him. In the process, somehow, you aroused his suspicions. When he stumbled over me, he thought I was involved, and attacked me." A thin smile. "It really worked out very well from your standpoint, though, didn't it? I provided an ideal distraction to give you a chance to get in the first blow."

The mockery in the old man's voice, the clarity of his insight, set Stark's teeth on edge. Tearing his eyes away from the other's, he shoved sand into the dead guard's grave in a miniature avalanche.

His companion chuckled dryly. "Shall I tell you why you wanted the xlan-tube, also?"

In spite of himself, Stark stiffened.

"First of all, allow me to conjecture that before you came here, you had a certain reputation both for intelligence and daring. Your name, please—?"

Stark sent more sand cascading down onto the Bherni's shattered skull. He didn't answer.

"Please, my friend! Humor me. After all, we neither of us have more than a few hours to live."

For a moment Stark still hesitated, then grudgingly identified himself: "I'm Dane Stark."

"Not the Venusian colonies' poet—?" Warmth and real pleasure came into the other's thin voice. "Some of your early verses were among my favorites. They showed a remarkable sensitivity and depth of feeling. And certainly your efforts against the Qua, later, bear out my point about your daring."

STARK smoothed the last of the sand across the grave, then straightened. "So?" This time he didn't bother to try to hold back the harshness.

"So, soon after you came here, you received a message—a note signed found in your hut, perhaps, or dropped into your cell at the receiving station. It told you that friends were close at hand, and that if you could somehow manage to escape from the stockade and reach a specified point outside undetected, they'd see that you were taken care of."

A numbness wormed through Stark. "How did you know?" he blurted:

"How indeed!" Scorn edged the old man's words. "Surely you're not such a fool as to think you're the first man, or the only one, to receive such a communication?" He snorted. "Believe me, there have been at least half a dozen others, to my certain knowledge."

"Then—?"

"What happened to them, you mean?" Stark's mentor laughed, a thin, bleak laugh. "They died, of course, just as you'll die before the end of the second cycle. 'Death is ever the lot of those who dare to defy the power of the gods from beyond the stars,' as the Qua so aptly put it."

"I see." The numbness in Stark began to take on the proportions of black, paralyzing panic. In a desperate effort to tear loose from it by sheer physical action, he stumbled to his feet and began kicking and trampling the red sand, obliterating the last traces of the digging.

The old man was still talking: "If the scheme were not so subtle, I'd say the whole thing was a Qua device to uncover weaknesses in their security measures. What better way could there be to learn of loopholes in a prison system than to set desperate men to work upon escape plans? But no —" —a shake of the white head— "omnipotent as the Qua now are, it isn't worth

their bother. Besides, there's the matter of the psychology involved —"

Of a sudden the heat and the smells and the infinite squalor seemed to close in on Stark. More than ever before, he felt trapped —trapped between red sand and blazing sun and compound walls; trapped by the dust in his nostrils and the salt on his cracked lips and the stickiness of the drying blood where the Bherni had clawed him.

Trapped, above all, by the words—endless words— his companion kept mouthing.

The words, and the deep-rooted feelings behind them.

For no matter how smooth-flowing the language, how well-turned the phrases, the words came out words of hopelessness . . . words of despair . . . words of defeat and degradation.

Hate surged, through Stark in that moment. Savagely he turned on the other.

"Shut up, you old chitzal!" he snarled through clenched teeth. "Maybe you're content to rot here. I'm not! So I don't make it out of the compound. So they kill me, even. What does it matter? It's better than lying here, dying by inches, till my soul's full of maggots and my guts turn to jelly! At least, with a xlan-tube, I'll take

some of the cursed Qua's guards with me!

He turned on his heel as he finished; strode away, still shaking with fury, back towards his own hut.

Behind him, a plaintive voice wailed, "Wait, Dane—! Please! Listen—"

Stark didn't even bother to look back.

CHAPTER II

A GAIN Stark sat in his vermin-ridden hut and waited.

Outside, swift-gathering Martian dusk was spreading mist-like through the compound. A hush seemed to have fallen over everything; a strange, vibrant hush, sinister as the shadow of the great Qua ship that hovered overhead. In the dim stillness, it came to Stark as a shock that Phobos already was racing Deimos across the darkening purple sky.

His time would come soon, now; very, very soon.

Once more, his fingers slid back and forth along the slim length of the xlan-tube hidden beneath his rags.

How could flaming death be wrought so graceful? Even the feel of the thing, so smooth yet lethal, roused a sense of awe within him.

And tonight . . .

He tore his mind away from the thought, forced himself instead to stare off again across the compound.

A fragment of verse formed in his restless mind:

*Silver coins, they hang in
the red world's sky, Light-
ing the way for him who is
to die.*

*Phobos, Deimos—is this
your destiny: To beacon the
reign of the Qua; our shame
their infamy?*

His mouth went dry and bitter in the same instant. Verse again—even here; even now.

Bad verse, at that.

How could his brain betray him so, slipping words into patterns before he could so much as say them? It was absurd. He wasn't Dane Stark, Poet, anymore; hadn't been for years. Here in the stockade, he was only one of a vast category, a symbol: Dane Stark, Enemy of the Qua.

As in another hour he might well be Dane Stark, Corpse.

Yet it was not in him to regret the gamble. Better to be dead, any day, than broken in spirit like the old man who shared his secret.

Stark sighed softly. Now that he was away from the other, his fury cooled, he regretted the rancor of his departure. Doomed himself—by age, if nothing else—the

old man could not but see all things as hopeless. He rated pity, not anger.

But that was all past, done beyond undoing. He had no choice but to keep his own thoughts on the future.

Again, he touched the xlan-tube.

Abruptly, then, the Forspark lights along the walls came to dazzling life that turned the semi-darkness into day. A siren shrilled, the signal for assembly.

So the waiting at last was over—! Stark's breath came faster. Tension knotted his stomach.

The siren's scream slashed louder, higher, a keening spiral of sound. Figures began to straggle from the huts, out into the stockade's meandering streets.

Another moment, and the piercing shriek cut off in a sea of surging echoes. But now that the earlier taut hush was broken, voices—a hundred; a thousand—rose to replace the siren. Harsh and sibilant, shrill and guttural, they poured forth a din of fury and frustration.

The knot in Stark's stomach drew tighter. Stiffly, he came erect; rearranged his rags over the xlan-tube.

The siren shrilled again, strident and commanding. Head down, shoulders slumped, Stark shuffled out to join the other prisoners.

THE whole area was milling now. Heavy-thewed Uranian Daus crowded Martian falas. Flat-faced Europeans brushed knots of lobe-eyed Fantays. Jovians and Kobocs, Malyas and Chonyas, Mercurians and Transmi—life-forms from a dozen far-flung satellites and planets, they swarmed and snarled and cursed their masters, old quarrels forgotten in their common hatred of the Qua.

But already the Bherni guards were marching in, the vocodors on the high towers blaring:

"Prisoners! Attention, prisoners! Tonight the one called Vardo the Malya dies for his crimes against the Qua! Like you, he dared to challenge the power of the gods from beyond the stars! See his fate and take warning! Rebellion means death! Take warning, prisoners . . ."

Words, harsh and threatening. But only words. The prisoners ignored them.

The Bherni guards spoke a different, sharper language. In soundless savagery, as always, they surged forward—closing with their prey, striking out with the heavy butts of their Talistan rayguns. A Pervod reeled back, shattered wing dragging. Grey-green sludge oozed from a gash in a Thorian's midriff.

The shouts of hate faded to sullen mutterings. Milling knots of

prisoners converged, herded into a column.

Still Stark hung back, waiting till the mass of his fellows were into formation, and an ice-eyed Bherni had started to veer towards him.

Then, unresisting, he shuffled to a place at the rear end of the line. It was enough, for now, that the xlan-tube's sleek shaft still gouged his belly.

Up ahead, a guard bellowed an order. The prisoners began to move forward, out of the rabbit-warren of the living sector into the shadowy, dim-lighted assembly area of the compound.

Simultaneously, the gate at the far end opened. Armored carriers rumbled through, a dozen of them—great, lumbering vehicles, heavy with proton cannon and crowded with more guards.

The first swung wide of the high stand reserved for executions such as this one, then turned sharply and drew up well back, facing the platform. As the vehicle halted, a mobile Forspark unit atop it blazed centering the scaffold in its cone of cold, pitiless light.

Now the second carrier moved in, stopping close to the stand itself. The vehicles following backed into wheel-spoke positions so that they surrounded both second carrier and platform, a chain of

miniature forts on wheels, linked one to another by ranks of heavily-armed Bherni guards between.

The column of prisoners reached the barrier as the maneuver was completed; fanned out in both directions. Herded by their guards, they surrounded the execution stand and carriers in a surging, close-packed, hate-radiating, amorphous mass.

Near the outer edge, thanks to his original position in the tail of the column, Stark worked his way warily through the crowd, closer and closer to the spot where the carrier with the Forspark unit stood, just beyond the fringe.

Now guards dropped from the carrier next to the stand, dragging a tall, dark-skinned figure with them: a Malya, old and gaunt, craggy-faced as the barren asteroids from which he came. A butt-stroke to the shoulder knocked him sprawling before he could even come erect. Kicks urged him on, up the steps of the platform, to stand at last, talon-pinioned by Bherni, against the framework of the execution rack.

A vocodor rasped loudly: "Prisoners! Here stands Vardo the Malya, gar of the raiders! When the Qua came, in peace, offering his people the benefits of the superior culture from beyond the

stars, he refused their friendship; slew their envoy, destroyed the units sent to refine the asteroids' *tolarum*. At his command, the planets on Pallas were reduced to rubble. He incited the Chonyas to rebellion; turned free the prisoners at Rhea. The blood of the Bherni is on his hands.

"Now has come his hour of reckoning, as it comes to all who defy the might and reject the benevolence of the Qua. Here, tonight, he shall die, so that you others may take warning.

"Listen, then prisoners! The Qua seek only to share their mighty culture with your system's peoples. In return, they ask naught but your aid in collecting the useless *tolarum* found in your worlds. They have proved this to your fellows on every satellite and planet. There is an end to war and raiding, a new order in which all prosper who help the Qua. Co-operate with them, and peace and happiness shall be yours also. Defy them further, and you too shall die!"

Stark hardly heard the blaring words. Taut-nerved, his hand on the hidden *xlan-tube*, he fell back yet another step, nearer to the edge of the crowd and the Forspark carrier.

Close to his ear, then, a reedy, mocking voice whispered, "Well,

poet?"

Stark went rigid. Ever so slowly, ever so carefully, he turned.

The old man stood beside him, lips twisted in a thin, wry smile.

With an effort, Stark held himself from violence. "What are you doing here, damn you? Do you want to get us both killed?"

"On the contrary, poet." The other's thin smile broadened just a fraction. "Call me an observer, if you will—a student of death, seeking further insight."

"Go away, you starbo!" Stark tried to push on through the crowd.

But the old man caught his arm. "No, wait, Dane—!" The mocking smile had vanished now, replaced by sudden lines of strain. Words came in a rush—urgent, driving: "Earlier, there at my hut— they cut deep, those things you said. It's not easy for a man to see himself as broken, spineless as some stinking Mah'ham that feeds on its own dead."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. I was angry." Again, Stark tried to pull away.

"No, you were right!" The other clung to him. "I see it all now, Dane. For me, in my weakness, it was easier to die here slowly than to fight back; easier to make fun of you brave ones' gamble than to take a chance myself. That's why I hunted for you here, Dane—I had

to tell you, let you know that I stood with you—”

In spite of his tension, pity touched Stark. He gripped the other's bony shoulder. "Forget it. I understand."

"Then take this, Dane. Take it so you won't forget like I did—about courage, about fighting back instead of dying by inches with your soul full of maggots." With trembling fingers, the old man pressed a hard object into Stark's palm. "Keep it, Dane. Keep it for me I—I was a poet once, too, you see, only I forgot . . . those things . . ."

The shaking fingers fell away. Stark stared at the thing in his hand.

It was a ring, a worn silver ring, its signet carved in a familiar, intertwining quill design.

The ring of a Galactic Award poet.

Stark forgot to breathe. Numbly, he looked up.

But his eyes found only close-packed bodies, unfamiliar faces. The old man was gone, lost in the seething crowd.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Stark slipped the well worn ring on his finger.

It dawned on him, simultaneously, that a hush had fallen over the multitude. Every eye hung fixed on the execution

stand.

Then the vocodor cut in, harsh and savage: "Forward, Malya! Forward—to death!"

The Bherni guards let go of the old raider. Ramrod-straight, head high and proud, he stepped to his appointed place beside the executioner; brought up his manacled hands in fierce defiance.

"Do you think to cow Malyas by slaying one man, you poor chitzas?" he cried in a terrible voice. "My raiders shall bathe in your blood!"

He turned sharply; spat full in the executioner's face.

With a roar, the Bherni sprang forward to seize him. Blood spurted under their talons.

The crowd surged forward—berserk, screaming.

But not Stark. Shaking with sick fury, he pivoted and shoved in the opposite direction, towards the Forspark carrier.

Then, of a sudden it seemed, he was out of the crowd and into the open, the vehicle a bare twenty feet away.

He broke into a run, his hand on the still-hidden xlan-tube.

A guard, turning, shouted and swung up a raygun.

STARK whipped out the xlan-tube in one smooth flow of motion and thumbed the exciter.

Blue flame lanced forth. The guard died in mid-stride.

Dodging past him, Stark sprinted to the rear of the carrier and scrambled up the ladder to its roof.

The eyes of the two guards atop the vehicle were glued to the execution stand, the milling mob of prisoners. He burned them down before they even knew that he was there.

Their belts held grenades, as all carrier crews' did. Snatching one out, Stark pulled the pin and tossed it through the open hatch, down into the mobile fort's armored heart.

The carrier rocked under the impact of the explosion. The great Forspark light blacked out.

Stark was thrown flat. For a moment, in the sudden dimness, he could see nothing.

Then, before he could rise, from somewhere out of the night and chaos a Bherni was upon him—talons raking, hot breath fetid. A blow numbed his hand. The xlan-tube slipped from his fingers.

Stark twisted wildly; tried to tear free.

But the talons would not let him go. A scaly arm wrenched his head back, so violently he could feel vertebrae grate.

Desperately, he kicked and writhed like a sanza. But it was

no use; the talons still held. Fire ran through his backbone. Death's laugh rang in his ears.

Only then, to one side, he glimpsed motion, a body, thinning white hair.

The next instant the Bherni jerked back, away from him, and with a convulsive shudder slid slowly, limply, from the carrier's roof.

Stark sucked in air. Through a red haze, he stared half-unbelieving at the old man, now standing by the mounting ladder—wild-eyed, still triggering a ray-gun.

But already another Bherni was lunging in, snatching at the weapon. Tearing it away from the old man, the creature smashed the butt down on the white-thatched head.

Stark clawed up his fallen xlan-tube; seared blue flame through his savior's attacker.

The Bherni died.

And then, incredibly, there were no more guards.

The tightness of fear in his throat, Stark stumbled to where the old man lay.

Even in the dim light, one look was enough.

But there was no time to grieve the fallen. Not when every second loomed the menace it did now.

Lurching back to the open hatchway. Stark lowered himself through it, down into the carrier's bomb-bulged hull.

There'd been Bherni inside. The stench of their blood made him retch, and his feet slipped in slime. But he forced himself on, groping through the darkness till he'd dragged together some torn, twisted seat-pads and shattered panels, and a great metal plate torn loose from one wall.

Stretching flat in a corner, he piled them over his whole body, heaped rubble to hide him, and then tried to relax. He had no choice. For the time being, at least, his part in this whole mad enterprise was finished. Now there was nothing left for him to do but lie here in the black stench-laden silence, and wait, and hope, and feel a band draw tight across his chest as he thought about a silver ring and a white-haired man whose name he didn't even know . . .

CHAPTER III

IT was dark, at least, in the carrier park, and Stark was glad for that.

Silent, wary as a hwin, he climbed the access ladder and peered out the open hatch.

He saw no one. Nothing save

the dim outlines of heavy vehicles parked row on row lay within his field of vision.

A little of the tension went out of him. For the first time in an hour, he dared to draw a real breath.

It loomed in his memory like a nightmare, that hour. Rigid, heart hammering till he thought someone must surely hear it, he'd lain in the armored monster's stinking hold, listening to the berserk fury of Bherni guards counting their dead.

Then a light had blazed through the hatchway, probing this way and that. A non-com had dropped down, inspecting the damage and checking for possible survivors of the grenade's blast.

That had been the worst; those moments. Every instant, Stark had expected the creature to kick into the pile of wreckage that hid him.

But thanks to the shambles, the Bherni had shown no taste to linger. Aided by two of his fellows, he'd gotten out the corpses, then hurriedly left.

Apparently, too, the explosion had torn loose the steering mechanism, so instead of putting in a driver, the guards had towed the vehicle out.

The clang of the stockade gates behind the carrier had rung in

Stark's ears like the very chimes of freedom.

The mobile fort bounced onward, then, to draw up at last here in the park.

Not that he'd known what the place was at the time. For him, it stood out merely as another stop, pregnant with the possibility of disaster.

But when, all about, the roaring carrier engines silenced, and the guards' voices faded to dying echoes, the spark of hope within him could not but glow a trifle brighter. At last, with tremendously painstaking heed to the necessity of making no noise, he began to strip away the sheltering wreckage. That done, he rose cat-footed and, xlan-tube in hand, made his silent way to the nearest vision slot, there to discover that his transport now stood in the carrier park.

Then, though his second, more detailed survey from the open hatch showed no sign of danger, once more he hesitated.

What if the park were guarded? What if the message had indeed been a trick—the trigger to a new trap set by the Qua?

The skin along the back of his neck prickled at the thought.

But the road of indecision led to certain death. He knew it.

It left him no choice but to

act.

Noiseless, taut-muscled, he pulled himself up over the rim of the hatch and, flat on his belly, wormed his way to the edge of the carrier's roof.

Nothing happened.

Swinging his legs over the side, he dropped to the ground; paused for a long, strained moment in the shadows, heart pounding.

Bending low, he darted across to the next carrier.

Still nothing.

Another pause, while he searched for signs of discovery or danger. Finding none, he made a second quick run.

In three minutes, moving so, he was at the high, piked fence that bounded the park.

Stark followed it to a gate.

A gate, and a Bherni guard.

But the guard's attention was focused on the area outside the fence, not the carriers within. In two minutes he lay dead, and Stark was through the gate and on his way.

He found the roadways beyond ominously silent and deserted; a commentary on Bherni ruthlessness in dealing with interloping Martians, no doubt.

But such had their advantages also for escaping prisoners, Stark decided. Taking advantage of the relative freedom of travel they of-

ferred, he moved quickly back towards the compound and the building marked in the mysterious X's message.

The place lay close by the stockade gate, on the edge of the port ramp away from the old town: along, low, functional structure, without grace or ornament or windows.

Hesitating for a moment in the lee of a crumbling lyndyse-stone monolith, Stark studied the unit. From its appearance, he judged it to be a warehouse of some sort. No light showed; no trace of life.

What lay within? The start of a new road—or the end of the old?

Of a sudden he was sick of caution; sick of skulking, sick of hiding. Recklessness surged through him in a rush. Boldly, he strode from the shadows, out across the ramp to the building's entrance.

THE door opened to his touch, as the message had promised. Xlan-tube in hand, Stark stepped into the utter darkness beyond and eased the portal shut behind him.

Side-stepping as the latch clicked, he groped his way along the wall.

A whisper of sound. Stark froze.

Light blazed in the same instant—a narrow, blinding beam that hit him square in the eyes.

More by reflex than thought, Stark whipped up the xlan-tube.

A voice crackled, low-pitched yet commanding: "No! Stop it, you fool!"

A human voice.

Stark eased his thumb off the weapon's exciter. "Get that light out of my eyes, then!"

"Of course. Sorry." The light flicked away, redirected to an open doorway on the far side of the room. "In there, please."

Stark strode forward, following the beam. The light-holder followed, to one side and a pace or so behind.

Then they were in the second room. The door clicked shut.

A moment later, a Porni switch whispered. Light-panels flooded the chamber with cool, even illumination.

The place was an office, obviously, twin to a million others.

Stark wasted no time on it. He had eyes only for his companion.

But the man was as ordinary as the office—colorless; utterly without distinction. In height, in weight, in posture, he might have been cast to typify an average. His features were commonplace, minus any marked signs of strength of character. Eyes and hair

alike were a nondescript brown. He wore a shabby, shapeless garment somewhat like that of a space-carrier maintenance man.

Stark felt a twinge that might have been disappointment. "You're—'X'?" It was almost as if he didn't want to ask the question.

The other moved to a desk with springless steps; drummed two fingers on it in a nervous, uneven pattern. The lacklustre brown eyes flicked over Stark without ever seeming to come to rest directly on him.

"And you're Dane Stark."

Stark almost jumped at the contrast between the other's voice and appearance.

Because the voice still held the crackling drive he'd caught in the outer room; a tight, relentless urgency that completely contradicted everything else about the man.

"You've a lot of questions, no doubt; we'll get them out of the way first." Stark's companion was studying an empty wall now; tugging at an earlobe. "I'm Paul Flavel—Earth stock, but from a family three generations on Mars. Under the Qua, I'm administrative director for this compound."

"Director —!" A chill ran through Stark. His whole body drew stiff with tension.

"Director." The flat way the

other said the word made it a challenge, a grim, cold symbol of defiance. "Not all of us are such fools as to try to fight the Qua on their own terms, Stark. We don't charge out like Vardo the Malya in raider ships, or hide with the hueccos in Venus' swamps as you did."

"I see." It was an effort for Stark to hold hands and voice steady.

Flavel's two fingers were drumming on the desk again. He kept on talking as if Stark hadn't spoken.

"No, Stark. That's not for me. I'd rather face facts; acknowledge that for now, at least, we can't hope to meet the Qua in open battle. So where does that leave me?"

The brown eyes passed over Stark as Flavel asked the question. There was something insulting, infuriating about the way they flicked and shifted—never pausing long enough to meet Stark's own gaze; never really looking at him directly.

Stark snapped, "Apparently it leaves you where you are—a traitor to your own kind, directing a Qua prison camp." The harshness of the words made him feel a little better. He liked the taste of them almost as much as he was rapidly coming to dislike Flavel.

Yet the other refused to give him even the satisfaction of answering anger: "Of course. That's what put me in a position to have you come here." A mirthless chuckle. "You fool, you even talk like a poet!"

Stark took a quick, fury-driven step forward.

FLAVEL didn't even pause in his finger-drumming. "The trouble is, I need help. I can't leave here myself. My job won't let me. So, I've no choice but to find someone else—someone like you, with a fool's luck and a romanticist's moronic daring. That's what I've been hunting for, all these months. You've proved you're the man by breaking out of the stockade and getting here tonight." He left off the drumming and began to tug at his earlobe again. "You're going to Earth."

"Earth—!" Stark rocked.

"That's what I said." The shifting brown eyes appeared to study Stark's knee-caps. "I've got clothes and identification for you, a map to show you where to go. The worst that can happen to you is that you'll be trapped and killed, and you'd have died anyhow in a few months, here in the compound."

Stark drew a deep breath. He

forced himself to speak slowly, levelly: "Back when you started you said I had a lot of questions. You're right. Maybe you'd better answer some of them now. Because if you don't, I'm liable to decide to take my chances on my own, and to hell with you."

"The issue's clear enough, isn't it?" Flavel's characterless face drew into a sneer of sorts. He stared at his own uneasy fingers. "No one's ever seen a Qua. It's time we did."

Stark frowned; groped. "You mean—?"

"I mean that when the Qua ships came into this system, from Tal Neeni only knows where, it took just three battles for them to break the backbone of our whole Federation. In their way, they're a superior culture. Our weapons couldn't even touch them."

Stark nodded slowly, not speaking.

"It turned out that all they wanted from us was the stuff they call tolarium. Analysts I've talked to say it's some sort of radioactive amalgam, hard to find and even harder to refine. And apparently it can't be produced synthetically. Why the Qua need it, no one seems to know. But it's important enough to them to make them take over." Flavel resumed his ear-tugging. A

thoughtful note crept into his voice, dulling its edge. "For us, the key point's that these Bherni monsters they brought with them are the only contact between us and the Qua. Yet we know the Qua exist. They have to; the Bherni haven't a fraction of the brain-power it takes for the Qua operation. I know; I've worked with them."

Flavel paused, eyes and hands momentarily unmoving.

"And so—?" Stark probed bleakly.

"So we've got to have data—more facts on the Qua and their culture!" The thoughtful note was gone from Flavel's voice now, the harshness back in it. He seemed to radiate drive and fierce urgency in spite of his appearance and eye-shifting and drumming. "There's a machine that may do the job—"

Stark interrupted sharply: "A machine? What kind of a machine?"

"Do you think I'm fool enough to tell you?" Flavel drummed a new tattoo on the desk, nervous and uneven. "Have no illusions there, you zanat! I've no intention of giving you any chance to take my mission over. As a matter of fact, and to save you wasting your time trying, I'll tell you now that the thing's un-

completed, an experiment that went wrong. But I've figured out a way to make it work. That's why you're going to Earth—to find it, ship it back to me—"

He broke off; jerked open a desk drawer, fumbled out a flat card-case, and tossed it to Stark. "Here. I've forged papers for you." And then, turning abruptly: "Come on."

Narrow-eyed, wary, Stark followed him through a doorway at the back of the office. Together, they walked through a long, echoing room piled high with duroid space-shipment cases.

Flavel gestured to them: "You'll go as freight. I've equipped a case with an oxygen converter. We'll seal you inside it as soon as you've cleaned up and changed clothes . . ."

There was a radiation bath in a cubicle at the building's far end, then; beard remover, hair trimmer, a nondescript wardrobe.

Through it all, Stark's mind raced without rest. Bleakly, dispassionately, he tried to appraise Flavel and his motives.

Even giving appropriate weight to his own instinctive dislike of the man, and discounting it, he found himself frowning over the pattern that took form.

For one thing, why would an enemy of the Qua have to seek

out a prisoner from the stockade to help him? A word of his goal would have brought him free aides by the thousand, on Earth or any other planet.

For another, if the mission were as simple as Flavel described it, any transport crewman would have smuggled in the machine for the price of a few swigs of kabat, no questions, asked.

Finally, there was the matter of Flavel's own character. What kind of a man would take service with the hated Qua administering one of their dread prison compounds?

Or consider, even, this present business: the dark thread of ruthlessness that ran through it. It was one thing to battle the Qua and the Bherni with blood and iron; another for a human to toy with the life of one of his own species. To set up escape from the stockade as a screening test for helpers—even though it lay within Flavel's power as director to get a man out with less danger—showed a twist of thinking that ran close to pure sadism.

Or did it? Was there, perhaps a different motive behind it?

For now, at least, those were questions without answers. Giving up on them, Stark finished his cleanup, pulled on his new garments and turned once more to the

other. "Well, Flavel?"

As always, the brown eyes dodged his. Lumpy fingers moved in a nervous palm-brushing. "This way . . ."

IN silence, they walked to an open space-shipment case close by the loading docks. Flavel gestured to it, a quick, jerky movement. "This is the one. You'll find everything in it. I've already booked it to leave on the next blast."

Stark glanced at it, unmoving. "What if it's inspected?"

"It won't be. The manifest lists it as paleontological specimens for the New Port Research Center. I send such there often—a hobby of mine. The cover letter to the Center instructs them to open it at once."

"And then?"

"Dispose of whoever opens the case with your xlan-tube."

The skin along the back of Stark's neck prickled. "You mean—murder?"

"Call it that if you want to." The brown eyes flicked contempt. "Personally, I'd term it necessary elimination of an obstacle. When you've taken care of it, go to room 219A of the development section. The machine's there, in storage, tag XP7037. I've written the numbers—room and tag both—on

the back of your identity card, so you can't forget them."

Stark nodded, slowly, not speaking. He kept his eyes downcast to hide the things in them.

His thoughts about Flavel had been too kind. He'd given the man too much benefit of the doubt.

So, now, murder was to be added to the price of his freedom.

Flavel's voice cut through his dark reverie: "You're not talking much, Stark. Can it be you don't like your assignment?"

Teeth clenched, Stark looked up slowly. "That's right. I don't like it." And then, flat and defiant: "As a matter of fact, I don't intend to carry it out."

"I wondered if a Venusian poet"—Flavel smirked and tugged an ear-lobe—"might not take that attitude." A pause; a shifting. "Maybe you'll change your mind, though, when I tell you about the deadline I'm setting."

Stark fought with his temper. "What deadline?"

"It's simple enough." The other kept on smirking. "You see, you're overlooking the fact that you're an escaped prisoner, Stark. Thanks to your luck and your daring, I'm the only one who as yet realizes that you're gone; the thick-headed Bherni take it for granted that the confusion and slaughter tonight was all the work of that old

chitza who was killed. But by the end of the next cycle, you'll be missed and posted. That's why I wanted a man from the stockade for this job."

As he talked, an ugly, guttural note of menace pushed the smirk from Flavel's voice. He leaned on the open shipment case, drumming at its edge two-fingered.

"Here's your choice, then, Stark: Do as I tell you, and go free on Earth, complete with identity papers. I'll even list you on the compound death report, so there'll be no record of your escaping.

"But if that machine isn't packed and on a Mars manifest within twenty-four Earth hours of the time you ramp in at the port there, I'll put out a system alarm on you, announcing that you've escaped to Earth after killing half a squad of Bherni guards, and describing your forged papers."

The silence echoed, then; a long silent moment of it. Stark hung in a strange private world, unable to think or find words.

"Does it bother you so, Stark?" Flavel taunted. "Are you thinking about old Vardo the Malya, up there on the execution stand? Wondering how it will feel to die like him if you go against me?"

Rage grew in Stark—seething, tumultuous. Spasmodically, without volition, his hand moved to the

xlan-tube in his belt.

Flavel laughed aloud. "Oh, your xlan-tube! You're thinking of killing me, now, even though you pretend to stick at what you call murder!" His fingers drummed faster, a muffled blur of sound and movement. "Go ahead, Stark! Kill me, if you've the stomach for it. I'm not even armed; there's no danger."

Stark's fingers froze. With a curse, he dropped his hand from the weapon.

"So! You do remember Vardo!" Flavel's brown eyes flickered with triumph. "I thought you would, you know. That's why I decided to make it death for him. Good sport for the Bherni, and a lesson you scum in the stockade would remember."

Stark stood rigid. "*You . . .* made it death for Vardo—?"

"Of course. I'm director. The Qua delegate all such details."

With a surging effort, Stark tore his eyes from the other and stared down at his own clenched fists. For an instant he almost wished he were back in the compound . . . or dead . . . or capable of cold-blooded murder.

Only then light glinted chilly from the ring on his finger . . . the worn silver ring the old man had given him.

The answer he sought came

flashing up with it.

"Well, Stark?" Flavel again, pushing. "Which is it? Live free? Die like Vardo?"

"Who knows . . ." Stark began and then, without warning, sprang forward. Savagely, he exploded his clenched fist into Flavel's middle.

The wind went out of the man in a gust. He crashed backward against the piled shipment cases.

Like a tiger, Stark followed. "For Vardo!" he snarled, and smashed home another blow—to the hinge of the jaw, this time.

Flavel sagged limp in his grasp, head lolling.

Stark smiled thinly. Lifting the other, he carried him to the open shipment case and unceremoniously dumped him in. The cover was sealed on in less than two minutes.

Stepping back, then, Stark saluted the case with grim humor. "I hope you like Earth, Director!" he announced aloud. "But if you don't you can always try explaining how you got there to the Bherni!"

CHAPTER IV

THE ramp outside the warehouse still lay dark and deserted. Closing the door carefully behind him, Stark turned right, towards the old town, with its Per-vod cones and Fantay spires and

the flat-roofed dwellings of the llorin.

The knife slashed through his tunic as he passed the corner of the building.

But he was already turning, moving by sheer reflex in response to the flicker of movement.

The knife flashed again, spearing at him.

Stark lunged in, side-stepping. Clutching the hand that held the weapon, he wheeled under his assailant's arm, twisting and levering.

The arm gave under the pressure.

Stark wrenched the hand higher, up between the shoulder blades.

His adversary gave a numb, choked cry. The fingers opened. The knife, falling, rang on the ramp.

Stark said tightly, "That's better!" Letting go the hand, he spun the other hard back against the wall of the warehouse.

The impact brought a new gasp of pain.

The gasp of a woman.

Stark halted a blow in mid-striking. With a curse, he jerked his opponent forward—straining his eyes against the darkness, pulling away the hooded cloak.

Soft hair spilled over his hand in a cascade. Perfume drifted to his nostrils. The dim outlines of a face took form, smooth-featured

and lovely even in the gloom. Below it, where the cloak hung open, he glimpsed high, firm breasts, smooth and bare as the face.

Stark stepped back, still not quite believing his senses. "Why did you do it, Malyalara?" he demanded. "Why try to stab a man you don't even know?"

"Why indeed!" The woman's voice held tears of fury, frustration. "Did you think Vardo, gar of the raiders, would die unavenged, you pale stabat? Did you think that Jasa could sleep, with her grandfather's blood still staining the talons of your thrice-accursed Bher-ni?"

Stark stared at her. Then abruptly, he clipped. "Tell me, Jasa. Who am I?"

"Who are you—?" A sudden note of uncertainty flickered in the Malyalara's voice. "You—you are him they call Flavel, Paul Flavel, the compound director. The one who deals death in the name of the Qua, through the Bher-ni—"

Stark said gently, "No, Malyalara."

"What—?"

"I'm not Flavel." And then: "My name's Stark, Jasa. Dane Stark, of Venus."

The Malyalara's eyes widened. "You mean—Dane Stark, the bard?"

"So they once called me." Stark

laughed shortly. "Though I'd never have guessed that a Malya knew of me."

"And why not?" Visibly, Jasa's back stiffened. "Among us, bards are honored. Who else would set down the deeds of our raiders? Our whole people are poets—poets in blood and iron, fire and pillage! When the Qua at last fall, they'll fall to the Malyas, and our bards will sing of it—"

Stark cut in: "Hold, Malyalara. We've got to find cover. Talking can wait for a better time and place than the shadow of a Qua prison compound." He took her arm as he spoke; threw a nod towards the old town. "There's safety in that rabbit-warren, if we make it."

For the fraction of a second, the woman hung hesitant. Then, quickly, she nodded. "You are right. Let me find my knife . . ."

"Here." Stark scooped it up, handed it to her. "Now, quick, before light comes—"

"Of course." Jasa came close beside him. Her hand touched his arm.

He started to turn towards the lights of the old town.

The next instant, Jasa's fingers gouged into his forearm. Steel pricked through the skin of his throat, deadly close to his windpipe.

Stark went rigid. "Jasa—I

The knife-point dug deeper. "Move an inch and you die, starbo!" Triumph rang in the woman's taut whisper. "Did you think to deceive me, even for a moment? Dane Stark's a prisoner; you're Flavel!"

SWEAT stood out on Stark's forehead. "You she-cat, you're mad as a ban! I blasted my way out—"

"Indeed?" Her laugh mocked him. "Then why were you there, in that building? Flavel entered—that I know, from the lips of a raider. So if you are not he, you met him. Would a fleeing prisoner do that?"

"I came here to meet someone else." Even as he spoke the words, Stark knew no one could believe them. "There was a message—a trap by Flavel—"

"Oh, a trap!" Jasa's low laugh held death in it. "But of course you escaped it."

"Yes. I hit Flavel—"

"—and left him. Or perhaps you killed him, even!" The woman's voice rose in sudden fierce passion. "Do you think to rob a Malya of vengeance with cheap lies, you chitza?" The knife gouged so deep Stark choked on it.

Jasa said: "We'll go back together, you and I, into the building. If Flavel's there, I'll believe you. But if we find no one, I'll know that you yourself are Flavel and a

liar to boot, and my knife will drink deep of your blood!"

Her hand left Stark's arm as she finished. Twisting lithely, she whipped the xlan-tube from his belt and leveled it at him, then lowered her knife. "Forward, now, starbo! In to the warehouse!"

Numb, heavy-footed, Stark moved before her along the front of the building.

Where would it end now, this madness? Could he hope to uncase Flavel before light came?

For that matter, would the Mal-yalara even let him explain or open the container? Suspecting a trick, might she not burn him down?

Yet to try to disarm her now—that was hopeless.

The warehouse doorway yawned, a bare dozen steps ahead. Silently, Stark cursed all Malyas.

Then, off to one side in the darkness, a low whistle sounded.

Stark stopped short, half-turning.

Out of the night, a strange, shapeless shadow was descending upon him.

He jumped back by instinct; struck out at it wildly.

Too late. Silken strands brushed his face and set his feet tripping. His blows met a twining, confining resilience.

There was a rush of feet, then. He glimpsed an oncoming Pervod. Bony bodies slammed against him.

Claw-fingers clutched at him. Lurching, off-balance he fell to the ramp.

In seconds, they had him trussed tight as a hurok, with still no word spoken.

Another low whistle. A carrier, unlighted, droned out of the darkness.

Stark's captor's lifted him, dumped him into the back end.

Smoothly, the vehicle moved off down the ramp towards the old town picking up speed with every turn of the wheels.

A shoulder bumped Stark's. Twisting, he looked round.

It was Jasa, bound tight as he was. Recalling the feel of her knife at his throat, he rather enjoyed the sight.

Her head moved close. She whispered, "Those shadows—what were they?"

"Pervod nets." In spite of all, Stark smiled to himself as he answered. The question told so much about Jasa. Peril? She ignored it. But true to her blood and her breeding, a strange weapon brought queries.

The lights of the town gleamed close at hand now. Turning, one of their captors threw down a smelly, blanket-like cover to hide them.

It put an end to all talk; breathing alone was enough of a problem.

The carrier left the ramp and swung onto a rough street. Three turns later, it slowed, then veered sharply and stopped. There was a rustling of bony vestigial wings. Then a Pervod, hideous in the glow of a lone thes-wood torch, stripped off the cover sheet.

Others of his kind slithered in as he stepped back. Stark and Jasa were lifted; carried bodily through a courtyard and into a time-blackened lyndyse-stone building.

It was dim inside—almost as dim as the courtyard. Closing the door, one of the Pervods slashed the prisoners' bonds cords and nets alike.

STARK'S whole body tingled with the rush of returning circulation. But the Pervods gave him no time to shake off the numbness. With curses and buffets, they dragged him and Jasa down a long hallway.

There was a door at the end—a heavy, massive door of glittering iridium alloy, wildly out of place in such a crumbling pile as this.

A Pervod touched a lock-switch. Smoothly, soundlessly, the barrier slid aside.

The room beyond was ablaze with light, so bright as to half-blind Stark as the Pervods shoved him forward.

Then, abruptly, his captors halt-

ed. Blinking, he stared about him.

It was the strangest room he'd ever seen. Great mirrors lined the wall, throwing back in dazzling reflection the rainbow patterns set by five huge European prism lamps hanging overhead. The floor was of iridescent l'anyak, polished till it seethed like a lake of flame beneath Stark's feet.

Yet these were things hardly to be noticed in the face of the miracle centered on a stand beneath the middle lamp.

The thing was a borvne crystal, a fire-jewel of Neptune, Stark decided. Nothing else could put forth that impossible cold internal blaze.

And yet—could it be? A full foot through it measured, ten times the size of the largest of its kind Stark had ever seen.

But the living fire that leaped within it was beyond denying. Awestruck, Stark could only stand and stare.

A woman's voice asked, "Do you admire my trinket?"

Stark turned sharply.

The speaker matched the strangeness of the setting. A painted haddah mask, so lovely that it was almost a caricature of beauty, concealed her face. Jewels, hundreds of them, glinted from the scanty garment that only half-veiled the sleek-curved perfection

of her body as she moved through a mirror-screened doorway into the room.

"It's a fire-jewel, of course," the woman went on, as if Stark had asked a question. "I paid the men who brought it from Neptune's pits a year here for it."

At last Stark found his voice. "A year here—?"

"You mean you don't know where you are? You've never visited the Pleasure Dome of Alveg?"

Stark's jaw dropped. "A pleasure dome—!"

"But yes." New sensuousness flowed into the woman's movements. "I am Narine of Alveg, and the Dome of Alveg is the finest from Horla to Stanscal."

Halting now, close by Stark, she studied him, masked face a tilt. One hand moved in a small, irked gesture. "But what is this to you? One should always speak to one's guests of their own interests." And then, with a fragmentary sigh: "Yet how can I, when I do not even know your name?"

She was like a cat toying with a mouse. Fresh anger walled up in Stark—anger at the woman and her mask of smiles and coquetry, anger at the mottled reptilian Pervods who held him vise-like in their grip, anger at the mockery that underlay the whole mad situa-

tion.

"Guests, did you say?" he lashed savagely. "I've got a different name for it."

"My friend, my friend! I only asked a question."

"Save your question, you tiro! You'll get no answers out of me!"

For the fraction of a second the woman's bare shoulders stiffened, then lifted in a careless shrug. "Your words hardly fit your plight, my friend." Her eyes flicked past Stark to the doorway beyond him. "The Malyalara, keepers."

Vestigial wings rustling, two Pervods jerked Jasa from the hall into the room of mirrors. For the first time, Stark saw her in full light.

The hooded cloak had been stripped from her. Now, erect and proud, she stood between her captors a lovely picture of Malya defiance—hair, black as midnight, rippling to her shoulders; smooth dark body bare to the waist in the fashion of her kind.

With a shock, it dawned on Stark that she was more girl than woman; that the hand that had held the knife to his throat was better fitted for caresses than spilling blood inflicting death.

Beside him, the masked woman spoke again: "Who is this man, Malyalara?"

"He?" Jasa's dark eyes glinted

scorn as they surveyed him. "Who would he be but Paul Flavel, traitor to his kind and toadying vassal of the Qua?"

"Flavel—!" The masked woman started. "What childish nonsense is this? Do I look such a fool that you think to deride me?"

"I speak what I believe." Jasa's face stayed calm. "If he's not Flavel, then I know nothing of him."

The other woman's fists clenched. "Have a care, Malyalara—!" Her words rang as brittle as breaking glass.

"I speak what I believe."

"Then perhaps I can persuade you to believe differently." The masked woman's voice dropped to a deadly purr. "Keepers, persuade her."

ONE of the Pervods laughed, a sadistic cackle. Deftly, he reached out a claw hand and raked bloody paths across the bare skin of the Malyalara's belly.

Ever so slightly, the girl's lips compressed. That was all. She said nothing.

The masked woman who called herself Narine of Alveg made a small, dry sound. "You are too gentle, Sarac. I said persuade her!"

Glee, dark and fiendish, glittered in the Pervod's reptilian eyes. Wordless, he spun the girl towards

him and did something to her Stark could not see.

A small cry burst from Jasa's lips. She jerked back, as if her body were of itself reacting, beyond the power of her control.

Stark went rigid. "Stop it!" he choked thickly. And then, turning to Narine: "What is it you want to know? I'll tell you. Just leave her alone!"

A light seemed to die in the eyes behind the mask. Satisfaction and disappointment mingled strangely in the woman's voice. "Are you so weak, chitza? Does your stomach turn at the sight of a few drops of this creature's blood?" A quick gesture, dismissing the subject. "But no matter. Tell me of yourself—everything. Everything!"

In harsh, clipped words, Stark told her. About the compound, and the message. About the escape . . . Flavel . . . the mission. . . sealing the Qua lackey in his own shipment case. About Jasa, and her attempt at vengeance, and the shadows that were Pervod nets.

Then, at last, he'd finished. Dry-lipped, tight-drawn, he waited for Narine's response.

Slowly, restlessly, still unspeaking, she moved past him in a semi-circle to the stand where the great borvne crystal stood. For a long, long moment her forefinger traced delicate scrolls and spirals along the

edge of the platinum base.

Thoughtfully, then, she raised her head; spoke to the Pervod on Stark's right: "The papers, Gonac—the case he said Flavel gave him."

Clawed fingers delved into Stark's tunic pocket; drew out the case and took it to her.

Removing the identity card, she studied it briefly, then turned it over and inspected the room and tag numbers written on the reverse side.

Another long moment of silence.

At last, then, Narine raised her head once more. Her eyes, gleaming behind her mask, fixed Stark.

"Now," she commanded, in a voice so gentle it was deadly, "tell me the true story."

"The true story—?" He stared. "What do you mean?"

"You zanat!" In two swift steps she was before him. Her hand whipped up to his face in a stinging slap. "Do you think I understand Flavel so poorly as even to dream of believing this banmaundering you give me? He's no tech, let alone an enemy of the Qua. Even if this machine you babble about existed, it's not in him to make it work where others have failed."

Stark bit down hard, his head still ringing from her blow. "I only told you what he told me," he retorted coldly.

"I choose to think not!" The woman's body twisted angrily like an etavi. "No, by H'sana's virgins! But you'll tell it straight before I finish, if my Pervods have to feed your heart to the kiavis!"

She stepped back; lifted the identity card once more. "Now! What do these figures mean: '219A'? 'XP7037'?"

"I told you. The machine Flavel wants is in room 219A of the New Port Research Center. It's tagged XP7037."

Narine slapped Stark again, harder than before. "The truth, you starbo!"

COLD-eyed, contemptuous, Stark looked her up and down. He said nothing.

For a moment he thought the woman was going to spring upon him. She crouched like a berserk wrong, shaking with sheer fury.

Then that, too, passed and she stood erect and poised once more—and somehow the change made her more menacing than had her rage.

"Very well, chitza. My keepers shall tear the facts out for me." And then, as Stark tensed: "But you need not worry, poet. They shall not touch you."

Stark could only stare at her blankly.

"No, they shall not touch you," she repeated; and somehow she

seemed to smile beneath the mask. "I fear it would take too much time to deal with you by direct torture. Why waste it when there's an easier way?"

She turned abruptly; spoke to the Pervods who held Jasa; "Bring the Malyalara closer, keepers!"

Needles of sudden panic prickled up and down Stark's spine.

The Pervods jerked Jasa to a new place before him.

"You understand, do you not, chitza?" A gloating triumph radiated from Narine. "Before, this creature's pain disturbed you. Now, we shall see how you enjoy her screams."

A chill ran through Stark. He could almost feel the blood draining from his face.

But Jasa said quickly, "Courage, Dane Stark! They cannot hurt me! A Malyalara learns to live with pain."

"A pretty myth." This from Narine. "Come, keepers! Find if she really believes it."

One of the Pervods wrenched the dark girl's arm.

No sound came from her. She only stood the straighter. But Stark could see the sheen that glistened on her brow.

Narine purred, "Now you, Sarac. Caress those smooth young breasts of hers in your own delightful way."

Leering, the Pervod reached

slowly towards the Malyalara, clawed fingers quivering.

Involuntarily, Stark took a quick step forward. But with savage strength, the Pervods who held him jerked him back.

Narine purred, "Soon now, poet! Another moment and she'll scream!"

In spite of himself, Stark squeezed his eyes tight shut. He dared not look. He could not breathe.

"Soon, Poet—I!"

Jasa screamed.

As if the sound were a trigger, a red haze exploded in Stark's brain. With all his might, he twisted; smashed the heavy boot Flavel had given him the full length of the brittle shinbone of the Pervod on his right.

An anguished shriek burst from the creature. Wildly, it lurched away from him.

Pivoting, Stark drove his right fist—free now—deep into the middle of the reptilian on his left.

THE creature doubled over as if sandbagged. Savagely, Stark hammered his elbow to the side of the ugly head.

The reeling Pervod let go of him. Leaping back, Stark wrenched at the bony vestigial wings.

They snapped with a dry splintering of bone.

But now the two other monsters

had let go of Jasa and were lunging for him. Barely in time, Stark sprang aside. Backhanded, he caught Narine's soft shoulder and shoved her bodily into their path.

But it was a hopeless battle. He knew it even as he fought it. All he could hope to buy with his blood was time, a few moments of time.

So very few . . .

Now a Pervod's claws raked through his tunic. Bony arms flailed at his legs.

"Jasa!" he roared. "Run for it, Jasa—!"

Another Pervod, tripping. Stark broke his back with a single kick. Triumph surged through him.

Only then he heard Jasa cry out; glimpsed her struggling with a reptilian in the doorway.

With a savage curse, Stark threw off his assailants and lunged forward.

But not towards Jasa.

No. Instead, towards the giant fire-jewel, the borvne crystal on the stand in the center of the room.

It took his adversaries by surprise. It was the wrong way for a man to go.

Or was it?

Staggering, bleeding, he kicked loose the last of them and stumbled to the stand. Clutching the crystal, with a mighty wrench he tore it from its mounting and

swung it high above his head.

Off to one side, Narine of Alveg screamed.

In spite of his wounds, Stark laughed aloud. "Do I smash it, you tirot?" he cried in a voice like thunder. "Do I splinter it on your cursed l'anyak floor — or do you let the Malyalara go?"

For a long, long moment the silence echoed. Then, at last, in a voice choked with hate, the masked woman mumbled, "Let the black stoy go."

Sullenly, the Pervod who held Jasa turned free her arms. Like a wraith released, she darted down the hallway and disappeared.

"And now," Stark said softly, "I follow."

The crystal still poised above his head, he took two quick steps towards the door.

Only then, out of the corner of his eye, he caught a sudden blur of movement.

He almost sighed, in that moment. Why was it that a man's luck could carry him just so far?

Yet he was all at once too weary to fight further.

He hardly felt the blow that struck him down . . .

CHAPTER V

THE pain came and went in the lost land that was his being,

pulsing out like bright sparks, glistening needles, to illumine his shifting shadow-world with a strange, ceaseless, vibrant ebb and flow.

And through it all a woman's voice kept whispering, whispering: "Stark! Dane Stark! Dane Stark!"

Spark . . . dark . . . Stark . . . They set up a childish rhyming rhythm in him. Perhaps it was his destiny—still; again to be a poet. A Galactic Award poet, even, like the old man who had died.

More rhyming words came to him: park . . . mark . . . bark . . . ark . . . shark . . .

He toyed with them there in the shadow-world as he'd toyed with other words those long, long years before on Venus.

But this wasn't Venus, and he wasn't a poet, and in his heart he knew it, even now. No; all his dreams and words and pretty rhymes were nothing.

There remained only Dane Stark, Enemy of the Qua.

Slowly, at last, he drew a great, deep breath, and there was the smell of ozone in it. A little at a time fragment by fragment, the shadow-world began to fade away.

But he still sensed the whispering and vibrance, and the smell of ozone; and that was strange indeed, for he knew that he yet must lie a

prisoner of masked Narine and her sadistic Pervod keepers in Alveg's Pleasure Dome.

Then he thought, *The whispering must be Jasa's. Somehow, she still must be a prisoner with me.*

But the voice was not the voice of a Malyalara, and he knew it. It sounded more like that of masked Narine.

Only that was absurd on the face of it, for why would Narine be whispering to him, unless it were to the accompaniment of bloody knives and white-hot irons?

More and more, the puzzle of it nettled him, till finally he faced the fact that rest—true rest—could not be his until he knew the answer.

Slowly, then, with a tremendous effort, he opened his eyes.

The grey dimness that met his gaze was more like the shadow-world itself.

But the whispering cut off as if a knife had slashed it. In its place came the hissing intake of a quick-drawn breath, close by his ear.

Painfully, Stark looked around.

Narine, Narine of Alveg, knelt beside him. The torn, soiled shreds of her jeweled garment told him that, beyond a doubt.

But her mask was gone, and he saw now why she had worn it. For a great scar cleaved her face from ear to chin.

Her lips drew thin as he stared at her. "So. You know my secret." Depths of bitterness beyond the plumbing vibrated in her words. "Would you believe it? — I was once as lovely as your thrice-cursed Malyalara tirot! But a Torod skrii can put an end to beauty in a moment. . ."

Her voice trailed off. Of a sudden, without warning, she buried her face between her hands and, shoulders shaking, wept.

Tight-lipped, Stark looked away. Then, stiff and aching, half-giddy, he twisted and sat up.

It gave him a wider field of vision—a field that showed him a companionway walled with plates of black dannite metal and illumined by the dim glow of swinging radiation lamps.

In a flash, he understood the grey shadow-world effect, the pulsing vibrance and the ozone.

He sat on a bunk cramped between two bulkheads of a cruising Malya raider ship!

Swiveling, he gripped the woman's bare shaking shoulder. "Narine! What happened—?"

"What happened?" Her hands fell from her face and she laughed through her tears like a raving ban. "What happened, you ask!"

A new spasm of mad mirth convulsed her. She rocked back and forth on her knees, back and forth,

caught tighter and tighter in hysteria's grip.

COLD-eyed stiff with tension Stark slapped her hard across the face—once, twice, three times.

Her laughter died. Choking, she whispered, "They came—"

"They—?"

"The Malyas, the raiders—a dozen of them. They butchered my keepers, and stole my crystal, and gutted my pleasure dome . . ."

"Then Jasa—she brought them —"

"No, no. It was she they sought. She'd slipped away from them to go to the warehouse to kill Flavel. They got there, afoot, just as my carrier was taking the two of you away. When they reached my house, found her cloak and her blood, they were like zanths gone mad. They swore I'd killed her; put my pleasure dome to the torch and carried you and me back to their ship—"

"But where are they taking us? What do they want?"

"I don't know; I don't know . . ." Narine choked and began to cry again.

But her words were a lie, and Stark knew it. *Blood cries out for blood!*—that was the heart of the Malya creed. If the raiders thought Narine had killed Jasa, her doom was sealed.

The only question was, why did they have him penned in with her?

But he had little time to brood about it. For of a sudden the ship's pulsing vibrance changed key. Stark felt an abrupt switch in balance, in pressure.

The next instant the impact of a not-quite-perfect ramping threw him bodily into a corner. Moaning, he gripped his aching head.

Like an echo, a harsh voice cried, "Up, slazots!" The dark hand of a Malya gripped Stark's shoulder and half lifted him to his feet.

In two minutes he was standing beside Narine outside the raider ship; standing on bleak, pitted astroidal rock, in the center of a circle of dark, hostile, Malya faces.

The raider chief was a tall, gaunt man who reminded Stark of Vardo. Obsidian-eyed, he looked from one of his prisoners to the other.

His words had the lash of meteors: "You zanats, you've killed the daughter of Vardo's dead son. Now you pay for it by the Malya law, in blood!"

He turned his back on them.

Stark choked on his own tongue. Desperately, he tore free from the hands that sought to seize him. "Wait—!" he shouted. "It's not true! Jasa's not dead! Or if she is, this woman killed her!"

"So, you crawling chitza?" The face the raider turned to Stark wore

a mask of contempt, complete and utter. "For her part, she says you did it. You're of a piece, you two, and rotten as the pleasure dome from which we dragged you. You die together."

He gestured to his men. "Roll back the rock. Release the zanth."

Narine screamed, "A zanth—? No, no . . ." Her knees buckled beneath her.

For Stark, there was a moment of anguished numbness.

Was this the place his life must end—here, on this bleak astroidal fragment, beneath the rush of a primeval monster?

His blood went cold. To die here—he, a poet!

A poet . . . All at once, he was staring down at the worn silver ring on his finger.

What had the old man said? "Take it so you won't forget—about courage, about fighting back . . ."

Words; mere words.

Yet what did a poet have but words, when his soul cringed and cried out for purging?

He could even die by them.

The fear fell away from Stark in that moment. The weariness, the pain of earlier wounds—like mist, they vanished.

Pivoting, fists clenched, he cried, "Do I die like a pole-axed huecco, Malya—or with a sword

in my hand, as your own law decrees?"

For the barest instant, the chief-tain's mask of contempt was shattered. But when he spoke, his words came gruff and curt and unrelenting: "A sword for the stabat, comrades!"

THEY threw it down from the loading hatch—a long heavy-hilted blade of blood-tempered dan-nite metal. Boldly, Stark strode to it; picked it up.

They were alone on the rocky plain now, he and Narine. The last of the Malyas had climbed to places high on their ship—atop the fins, along the loading ladders. For the second time, the raider chief shouted, "Roll back the rock!"

Aboard the ship, a winch whined. A line that stretched to a boulder on the side of a nearby knoll drew taut; began to creak.

Slowly, the rock slid back.

Close beside Stark, Narine of Alveg whispered, "Forgive me, poet; before we die, forgive me . . ."

He nodded tight-lipped, eyes not stirring from the rock. "If you want it that way—I forgive you."

Then, all at once, the rock was toppling, rolling. An avalanche of living death, the zanth lunged from the opened cave-mouth; and there was no more time for pleadings or for answers.

Infuriated, hunger-maddened, the creature charged straight for the two humans.

For a moment, in spite of all his resolutions, Stark stood paralyzed. What good was a sword against this twenty feet of nightmare? The great saw-toothed tail alone could mash in the ribs of a hwalon dragon! The jaws, the spike, the eight spurred, taloned feet—they were more than flesh and blood could face, let alone fight!

Then, with a spray of rank, hissing breath from the huge nostrils, the monster was upon him. Reflex, sheer primitive will to survive, took over. Spinning, Stark shoved Narine away from him, out of the charging killer's path. A leap carried him backward, in the opposite direction. With all his might, he cleaved with the sword for the base of the long snake-neck.

The plate-like scales turned his blade as if it were a feather. An out-flung spur ripped the tunic from his body.

Dodging as the monster reared, Stark leaped again—in, this time, so close that stones thrown up by the taloned feet pelted against him. Savagely, he drove the point of the sword at the uplifted purple belly.

The weapon bit in a full six inches. With a scream of rage, the

creature jerked back, rolling.

Stark hacked for the bulging eyes.

Fast beyond belief, the zanth whipped back its head. The sword missed the eyes and sank into the horn like an axe into a tree.

It wedged there. The hilt tore from Stark's hands. Weaponless, he sprawled on the rock, completely unprotected.

The zanth spun round and round in a fury, trying to shake the sword from its spike. Failing, it paused for an instant, again sighted Stark, and lunged at him.

Diving past it, he came up running and sprinted for the ramped Malya ship.

Like lightning, the thing whirled in its own length; thundered after him, gaining with every step.

Then the ship loomed. Panting, shaking, Stark stumbled to it; sagged against it, his back to the black dannite hull.

Spike lowered, the zanth charged him.

Stark dived to one side with all the strength that was in him. Behind him the zanth's spike rang as it crashed against the metal; snapped off at its base where the sword had cut into it.

Stark lurched up again. Sweat ran into his eyes. It came to him, numbly, that the zanth's charge could not but catch him.

But now, incredibly, the creature's great bulging eyes had turned wary. For an instant it poised, staring at him; then veered away.

Away, towards Narine.

Stark stood rigid.

But already, the monster was moving. Talons clattering on the rock, it stalked her as she backed from it.

Slowly, though, this time. No lunges; no charges. It was as if the broken horn had taught the creature a lesson.

Stark ran for the sword, lying free now beside the shattered spike.

HEAD swaying, great jaws working, the zanth picked up speed. It was almost as if it could sense the helplessness of its prey.

Narine backed faster . . . faster . . .

The zanth moved apace.

The woman whirled and ran.

But not far. Two steps only. Then, tripping over a loose rock, she sprawled to the ground.

The zanth charged.

A wild scream from Narine. Stark roared, "Roll, you fool! Roll!" and snatched up the sword.

Barely in time, the woman's body cleared the zanth's talons.

And now Stark was running; swinging up the sword.

He reached the zanth as it turned . . . cleaved the blade deep into

the hinge of the monster's left rear leg.

He was throwing himself flat even as he did it. By a hair's breadth, the mighty tail passed above him.

But the creature was already whirling, the razor-toothed jaws stretched wide. The red maw yawned. There could be no escape now.

Yet at least, the zanth might die with him . . .

With the last ounce of his strength, Stark hurled the sword straight into the gaping throat.

It was as if he had fed the monster a flaming brand. Shrieking hoarsely, it reared high on its hind legs.

But the tendons Stark had slashed would not hold it. The left leg gave way. With rock-crushing force, it crashed to the ground.

Like a scurrying bulak, Stark scrambled away, out of reach of the clutching talons, the threshing tail.

But strength, endurance, were no longer in him. Even as he tried to rise, his legs buckled and he sagged once more to the rock beneath him; lay there, flat on his back, unable to move.

It was then he saw the ship: the great Qua star-ship lancing down out of space, straight at the rocky plain.

He tried to cry out, warn the

Malyas.

His voice failed him.

The next instant an eidel-bomb struck, just beyond the black raider craft.

The blast spangled the sky with huge, flaring fire-balls . . . hurled the Malya ship in a hundred-yard arc, to crash at last, shattered, on its side amid the boulders of the zanth-cave knoll.

Then the star-ship itself was ramping, in its own strange spiral fashion. Like a monstrous, blocky column, it dropped down from the void to a resting-place on the barren astroidal plain.

At first, as it plummeted towards him, it seemed to Stark that it must surely land upon him, crush him.

But no; its splaying base dug in a dozen yards away.

And now new peril threatened. For with a clash of gears, the personnel hatchways opened. Bherni guards leaped forth, their Talistan rayguns at the ready.

It came to Stark, out of nowhere, that though he could not flee, he well might play the corpse. Certainly he must appear bloody and battered enough to fit the part!

It was his only chance. Eyes closed, body limp, he slowed his breathing; tried to freeze the rise and fall of his chest.

Two running Bherni pounded by

him with hardly a glance. A moment later, roars and threshings announced that they'd turned their raygun on the crippled zanth.

Other feet echoed past Stark, walking and running. A wild shriek told of a Malya's dying. Through veiled eyes he glimpsed a distant guard in the act of dragging Narine of Alveg to her feet by the hair.

Already, it was quieter around him. The Bherni had scattered, spread out. In the midst of death and chaos, he had the sudden strange sensation of being utterly alone.

WARILY, he opened his eyes a fraction wider; dared to twist his head ever so slightly, the better to view the great Qua ship.

So far as he could see, it lay deserted, without even a sentinel at the open hatchways.

Those open hatchways . . . The sight of them lighted a spark within Stark — a spark rooted in sheer madness.

Or was it? What chance did he stand here, after all? If the Bherni knew he lived, they'd kill him. If they left him for dead, starvation would sooner or later claim him, marooned as he was on this drifting fragment of astroidal rock.

Even the maddest of courses could be no worse than that!

He chanced a quick look about

. . . found no one close enough to heed him.

With a twist, he turned over; wormed swiftly to the star-ship's nearest hatch; scrambled up and through it.

Still no sign of detection; no guard to halt him.

Jerking a raygun from the weapons rack just inside the entrance, he stalked cat-footed down the passageway.

It ended in a chamber that was obviously a Bherni duty room.

A wall-chart told him the thing he needed to know.

More passages; a spiral stair-shaft; control rooms with Bherni techs on duty. Like a shadow. Stark threaded his dangerous path, deeper and deeper into the ship.

And then, at last, beyond a final turn, he peered down a hall at a guard and a door.

The door.

Ice-nerved, Stark burned down the guard.

Then the door was before him—a door without even a lock.

His finger on the raygun's trigger, he shouldered back the portal and plunged into the pale green radiance beyond.

But no tumult met him; no cries or blows or weapons.

For incredibly, he stood alone.

Shock, frustration, disappointment—as one, they welled up in

him. In dazed disbelief, he looked about.

The place was like a cell, almost: a small, neat room centered by a single dome-shaped crystal case. The green lamps from which the radiance emanated ringed the dome, pouring their pulsing beams down on it. Sounds of faintly bubbling liquid came from a tank below.

Stark's heart turned to lead within him. Was this the end of the quest he was to die for? Were the Qua he sought naught but an outrageous Bherni myth?

And then, suddenly he knew it was not so.

For as he stood there, without warning, his brain was transformed into an anguished ball of fire. As if propelled by some giant hand, he crashed back bodily against the wall beside the door. Too late, his staring eyes focussed on the thing within the dome.

Life was there, in that case: powerful, malignant life, churning and seething. A mind-life, of a strain so potent that it disdained entombment in a body.

Or perhaps that *was* its body — that viscous mass that roiled and boiled within the crystal. Perhaps its species had evolved thus, in some unheard-of sea across the void, and so now had no choice for travel but these dome-tanks.

Besides, what need had such a

life-form for different structure, when through its Bherni serfs it could build star-ships and enslave whole solar systems?

The Bherni . . . Already, Stark could hear the clawed clatter of their racing footsteps. Called by the Qua, their mind-thing master, they were coming, while he, Stark, slumped here helpless, pinned against the wall.

THE agony in his brain stabbed sharper, deeper. Yet the weariness in him loomed so great that he no longer even tried to fight it. Numbly, he thought of the dreams he'd dreamed, the things that might have been. Of verse and Venus, and the prison compound. Of Jasa and of Narine; the old man and Flavel. Names twisted meaninglessly, took on form:

*Flavel and Narine
Have seldom been seen;
Narine and Flavel —
Both fit subjects for hell!*

It was, he decided, the driveling lunacy of a cracked mind.

A Bherni burst into the room. Stark's last hope died. Standing took too much effort. Half conscious only, he slumped to the floor and crumpled forward on his face atop his fallen raygun.

Like magic, the pain in his brain vanished.

He made no attempt to move.

The shock was too great for that.

But his mind raced in spite of him. Could it be that the Qua's thought-waves were transmittable only through the crystal dome, and in straight lines? That by collapsing to the floor he'd moved out of their path and field?

It was a question he couldn't hope to answer. But the very possibility gave him a new vision, a new dream. In spite of fatigue, he felt his muscles involuntarily tensing.

There were three Bherni in the room now — two by the crystal dome almost as if listening to orders, the other standing guard over him.

Abruptly, the two creatures by the crystal swung towards Stark. Instinct and logic alike told him it was now or never.

The closest Bherni started to reach for him.

Like lightning, Stark catapulted forward, between the monster's legs and past the stand that held the crystal dome.

Momentarily, it put the Qua between Stark and the guards.

And momentarily was enough. Head far down, Stark shoved the raygun's muzzle over the stand's edge and against the dome, and pulled the trigger.

The crystal burst like a Cerean bor-ball. Liquid and shredded tissue exploded to the farthest corner of

the room.

Tossing aside the raygun, Stark stumbled erect. He didn't even try to resist when the Bherni wrenched his arms back. What could any such trivia matter, in the face of the triumph that surged through him?

For he, Dane Stark, of all men—nay, all life-forms—in his solar system, had seen and slain a Qua!

CHAPTER VI

FLAVEL brushed back his nondescript brown hair. His fingers drummed their familiar ragged tattoo on the table. "It wasn't at the Center," he repeated harshly. "I found the place, all right. There were even fresh marks in the dust where the thing had stood. But the machine was gone. Some starbo had taken it away!"

He lurched up from his seat as he exploded the final words and, cursing, paced the floor.

"But what good would the machine have done without my crystal?" Narine of Alveg broke in. "It was the crystal that was lacking. You said that yourself, Paul. Only the Malyas took it, and without it —" Her shoulders lifted in a helpless shrug.

"I'd have had it, if it hadn't been for this fool." Flavel's ever-shifting eyes flicked bitterly over

Stark. "The machine, I mean. The crystal, too—"

Stark sighed and twisted to a new position on the creaking Bherni pallet. Of a sudden he was tired of listening to Flavel's never-ending jibes.

Or perhaps it was only that now—rested, finally—he was beginning to react to the close quarters and confinement aboard the Qua star-ship.

Narine again: "The crystal—?" The great, ghastly scar on her cheek quivered. "How did you expect to get it, Paul? It was mine, you know; the pride of my whole pleasure dome."

"If necessary, I'd have cut your scrawny throats for it." Flavel threw the words at her, harsh and brutal. "That was where I picked up the whole idea—from seeing that crystal in your pleasure dome. The machine—I'd heard about it when I was visiting the Center's paleontological exhibits, years ago . . ."

Stark turned over and made a determined effort to shut off his hearing. The story was strange enough, surely, but he'd heard it too many times in the past few hours.

And yet, now that he himself had seen the Qua, he had to admit that Flavel's gamble might have paid off. For in spite of all petty irrita-

tions, he couldn't help but admire the man's thinking and logic and deadly patience; the way he'd patched bits and pieces into a devastating pattern for raising a broken culture to victory from the ashes of its own defeat.

It lined up almost like an exercise in creative imagination:

Given the problem of devising a means to defeat the already-victorious Qua.

Then take a half-forgotten reference to a pre-Qua period machine (with a borvne crystal as its key component) that, on an experimental basis, teleported living organisms.

Add another that said a full-scale model had been constructed, big enough to handle a man; then abandoned because the only known borvne crystal of a size to fit it had been blasted to bits in a space-freighter crash.

Throw in a glimpse of a different, even larger crystal, displayed on a stand in Narine of Alveg's Pleasure Dome.

How many men could have worked out a plan of action from such fragments? Who among all a system's war staffs would have seen that from those trivial details might come a device to project bombs and raiding parties into the heart of each enemy star-ship?

Would it have worked? Stark

didn't know. But the Qua, at least seemed to find facets of it that perturbed them.

Stark shuddered a little as he thought back on that aspect.

Apparently there was only one Qua to a star-ship; for immediately after his capture by the Bherni, there'd been a transfer to a second craft for telepathic mind-scanning.

The creature had turned his brain inside out, probing for details about Narine of Alveg and Flavel. Stark still could shiver at the recollection of the white-hot pulsing of Qua thought-waves as the thing sifted facts and hypotheses from his mind.

In hours, Flavel had been dragged from his hiding-place on Earth, Narine from the ship of the Qua Stark had slain.

The inquisition that followed brought together a full hundred of the Qua. Relentlessly, they searched and probed and quested, heedless of their prisoners' agonized screams and pleadings.

Then, at last, apparently, the Qua had felt their picture was complete and perfect, save only for one missing piece.

A vital piece: the whereabouts of the machine.

But, equally apparent, the Qua were satisfied that none of their captives held that fragment, for they'd given up their probing.

SO, now, the three of them, they lay here deep within a star-ship, waiting for the death they knew must surely come.

Again, Stark turned restlessly, cursing the twist of mind that had made Flavel so secretive as to his scheme.

Why had the man gone about his project so, waiting for months for a prisoner to escape from the stockade? In that time, with the aid of a free ally, he might have brought crystal and machine together . . . blasted the Qua from the solar sysem in a night.

It made no sense.

Bleakly, Stark studied the other as he paced the floor . . . tried to fathom the mind that hid behind the lumpy, commonplace features and dull, lacklustre eyes.

The contradictions baffled Stark. How could any man combine hard, driving speech with a manner that spoke of confusion and ragged nerves? What linked his ruthlessness to quaking secrecy? Why would a patriot choose to serve as director for a stockade of the Qua?

No answers came. Again, still brooding, Stark stared off into space.

Now thoughts of Jasa rose to plague him: Jasa, all beauty and all courage . . . youth and smooth dark skin and raven hair.

Where was she now, his lovely

Malyalara? Dead in some stinking alley back in Alveg? Like him, a prisoner of the Qua?

Or had she, better luck, escaped from Mars as he had, racing through the void to the far asteroids that were her home aboard some black Malya raider ship?

He hoped so.

Not that it really mattered now, for him. Whatever Jasa's fate, he'd never live to see her again.

And that was the deepest wound of all, the hardest fact to face. Even the thought of it brought a mist before his eyes. Tight-lipped, he looked away.

But when he swung back again, the mist was still there. A strange mist, shaped more than formless, and with a swirling central core that seemed almost to glow.

Stark squeezed his eyes tight shut, then opened them once more.

The mist, the glow, were definite now beyond denying. A tightness in his chest, a knot in his belly, Stark lurched up on one elbow on his pallet.

"Stark! Are you ill?" This from Narine. And then, as her eyes flicked to follow his gaze: "That glow—! What is it?"

Flavel's fingers had stopped dead in their drumming.

Now, slowly, the mist seemed to draw together into a rectangle the size and shape of a small door.

Brighter it glowed, and brighter, till its radiance illumined the narrow room like a shimmering, gauze-screened light.

"By Tal Neeni—I" Flavel whispered hoarsely. "What trick of the Qua is this? Are all three of us going mad?"

As he spoke, a shape appeared in the center of the oblong light—the silhouetted form of a tall, lithe man with a stubbarreled Malya blaster in his hands.

For a moment he poised there, motionless. Then, with a crouching, a quick tensing of muscles, he leaped forward—forward towards Stark and Narine and Flavel, out of the glowing frame of light and into the star-ship's prison room.

A Malya, he was, a fighting Malya, dark and cruel and hard as the barren asteroids that were his home.

Now, blaster ready, the light of battle in his eyes, he stood before the captives.

FOR a moment the stunned silence echoed. Then Flavel cried, "The machine! The machine—I"

"Yes, the machine." The Malya chuckled grimly. "A surprise for the Qua, my friends; a special present from the daughter of the son of Vardo."

He stepped aside as he spoke;

and now there was another silhouette behind the light-frame.

A woman's silhouette, this time, slender and lovely.

She jumped through the frame, into the room.

Stark stumbled to his feet, heart pounding. "Jasa!"

"Did you think I'd leave you to die here, poet—you, who saved my life, back at the Pleasure Dome of Alveg?"

Her words were the proud words of the Malyalara, the daughter of the son of Vardo. But her eyes were the eyes of a woman, and Stark's heart sang at the unspoken things they told him.

Now more Malyas were coming through the frame—two, four, half-a-dozen of them.

"So. We all are here." Jasa turned to Stark. "Is there a way to call the Bherni?"

Flavel answered for him: "Yes. This button . . ." and pressed it with a trembling finger.

The Malyas checked their blasters.

The sight of it sent a lust for battle coursing through Stark. He sucked in air. "Quick! Give me a weapon!"

But Jasa only shook her head. "No, poet. Not this time. You, above all, must live to sing this victory, from Ceresta to Amara and Hidalgo."

Flavel caught her arm. "Let me fight in his place, then!" For the first time in Stark's memory, the brown eyes were hot and eager.

For the fraction of a second Jasa hesitated; and Stark knew that the memory of Vardo was upon her. But she shook it off. "If you will." She turned to a battle-scarred warrior. "Give this man a weapon."

The Malya tossed a light-pistol to Flavel.

The lock on the door rattled in the same moment. Silence fell upon the narrow, crowded room, echoing and deadly.

Then the door was opening, a Bherni shoving in.

He died with a Torod skrii in his throat.

But one of his fellows was crowding close behind him. With a cry of alarm, the creature whirled and fled.

The Malyas were after him in a rush, Paul Flavel behind them.

Or so it looked.

Only then, at the door, the six warriors gone, Flavel stopped short. With a twist and a kick, he slammed the heavy portal shut; threw the inner bolt to bar it. The light-pistol in his hand jerked up to cover Stark and Jasa.

"Narine!" The man's voice rang with harsh triumph. "Quick! Take the Malya slazot's weapons!"

The scar on the woman's cheek

twitched with tension. She jerked away the Malyalara's blaster; lifted the skrii from its leathern sheath.

"Now guard them." The prison warder already was moving towards the glowing radiance of the light-frame with quick, decisive steps. "I'll be back in a minute."

He leaped into the middle of the misty oblong; vanished from the room as if by magic.

Stark started towards Narine, then stopped short as her finger whitened on the blaster's trigger. "You *would* shoot, wouldn't you?" he blazed. And then, in bitter mockery: "Forgive me, poet; before we die, forgive me."

Color came to the scar that disfigured the woman's face. She didn't answer.

Then Flavel was back, plunging in upon them through the light-frame. "Send them after me, this time, Narine. I'll be waiting at the other end." He was laughing, his voice ragged and uneven with excitement.

Once more, he leaped and disappeared.

Narine gestured to Jasa with the blaster. "You first."

Wordless eyes cold, the Malyalara stepped before the light-frame; jumped; vanished.

"Now you."

The blaster was very steady.

With a shrug, Stark in his turn took his place before the box-like glow, then sprang forward.

IT was a strange sensation. For the fraction of a second he felt as if his whole body were disintegrating. He floated god-like, high above all time and space and matter.

Then as suddenly, reintegration came, and he was landing with a thud in another, different place. one pervaded by the musty smells of crumbling age.

"Out of the way!" Flavel clipped from the dimness beyond the radiant shaft.

Blinking, Stark stepped aside.

Now he could see again. Jasa stood close by him, in a room that was obviously part of some forgotten cellar. Facing them, light-pistol in hand, was Flavel.

The thump of feet; a gasp. Unsteadily, Narine stepped from the glowing beam to join their captor.

"Good. Now that we're clear of those Malya beasts and the starship there's time for some necessary questions." Briskly, Flavel stepped to the machine and clicked a switch.

The shimmering shaft the thing projected vanished; and now Stark saw that a dead tech sprawled beside the unit.

A moment of silence, while Fla-

vel tugged at an ear-lobe, brown eyes thoughtful. Then, abruptly, he centered gaze and light-pistol on Jasa; gestured with his free hand to the projector-like machine, with its great, lens-mounted borvne crystal. "I want to know about this."

"Do you?" Her eyes, stayed cold, disdainful.

"How did you know about it—where to get it? The tie-in between it and the borvne crystal?"

Contempt sounded in her curt laugh. "Do you give no one else credit for even a little wit, chitza? To save me at the Pleasure Dome of Alveg, Dane told your creature, there"—a scornful nod to Narine — "your plan, as well as he knew about it. She read aloud the numbers of the room, the tag. I remembered them, came straight to Earth on a raider ship, and found it. The diagram on the base-plate told our techs that the missing part was a borvne crystal—one of such a size as your slazot Narine had in her room of mirrors. When I found that others of our raiders had claimed it, I followed to the asteroid where the Qua destroyed them and recovered it from the wreckage."

Flavel's brown eyes flickered. His fingers drummed their tattoo on the edge of the projection unit. Tension, his earlier nervousness, seemed to grip him. "I thank you,

Malyalara. You've answered my questions fully." Even his voice held a tremor. "So, now you die . . ."

Jerkily, he raised the light-pistol.

Stark's blood froze. "Wait—!" he choked thickly. "You can't—!"

"I can't?" Flavel laughed, hoarse and hollow. "You fool, I must! You I'll let live; you're only a dreamer, a poet, and there have been moments I've enjoyed your verses. Perhaps I'll even keep you with me, to write new ones for my amusement. But the Malya taste for vengeance runs strong in this she-devil. I could never sleep a night in safety, with her alive, once she knew my true plan."

"Your true plan—?"

"Did you think I was such an idiot as to waste this marvel of a machine on war against the Qua?" The prison warder's half-hysterical mirth was raw and jeering. "No, you zanat! That was why I kept my work so secret, even from Narine. This thing can buy me power and luxury beyond my wildest dreams! The Qua will make me a king, a living god, when I give it to them!"

"The Qua—!"

"Of course, the Qua! Who else? Are you really so stupid that you can't see the pattern of their problem? They came here desperate, seeking tolarum as if it were the

breath of life itself. Perhaps, for them, it is. But sooner or later they'll exhaust our system's stocks.

"This device wipes away that worry for them! With it, they can send their Bherni serfs out to the last fading star, the farthest galaxy, to get more. There'll be no need for star-ships, or for light-years wasted in dangerous, futile searching—"

Flavel broke off. Of a sudden the hand that held the light-pistol was rock-steady.

Stark stood very still.

IN his mind's eye, in that flashing instant, he saw the endless years of bitter slavery that stretched before all the life-forms of his solar system; the blood and fire and sudden death, the anguish sown by the sadistic Bherni.

Yet strangely, they weren't the things that turned his heart to ice and drew tight the knot of tension in his belly.

No; for him, there was only the picture of a lovely Malyalara, dying. Of Jasa, lying on the filthy floor here, with blood in her hair and blank, staring eyes and proud breasts charred to cinders.

Words came to his lips before he was even aware that he was speaking; "You're going to have to kill me first Flavel!"

"What—?" The other's gaze

flickered. "Don't be more of a fool than you are, Stark! Why should you die for her, when with me you can have your choice of a thousand Malya women? You're a poet, not a moralist."

Stark's fists clenched till the worn silver ring bit into his finger.

This was the judgment of the worlds Flavel was speaking. This was how his kind saw the worker in words, the scanner of verses. To them a poet was denied even the right to be a man.

He smiled, then, ever so slightly.

What did it matter if the songs in him went unsung, the rhymes unwritten? What better monument for any poet than to die true to himself and to Jasa?

He said softly, "You'd better adjust your aim, Flavel," and already he was moving forward.

The light-pistol swung to cover him.

Thin-lipped, Stark gauged the distance. His muscles tightened.

Jasa clutched his arm. "No Dane; no—!"

He jerked free of her hand; advanced another step.

Narine, whispering faintly: "Paul — the zanth — he saved me —"

"Shut up, you scar-faced tirot!"

Lips gone white. Shock and fury contorting a disfigured face.

Another step.

Flavel's finger, tightening on his weapon's trigger.

Stark lunged. He wondered if he'd feel the charge that burned him down.

Only then, in the same instant, Narine too was moving; hurling her blaster against Flavel's out-thrust arm as the light-gun blazed.

The beam seared a line of flaming pain along Stark's ribs. He was glad for it, in a way. It put more blind violence into his blows.

Flavel crashed backwards against the wall, already sliding down.

Stark broke his neck with a kick before he could trigger off a second beam.

Silence, then. A whispering sort of silence. Stark turned slowly.

Dane Stark, Bard of the Malyas, now.

He and Jasa hardly heard Narine depart.

THE END

★ *Oxygen Can Rival Air!* ★

NO problem is more vital to the success of Lunar and interplanetary flight and settlement, than that of providing suitable air within a space ship and within a hypothetical colony. The human metabolism can get away with some pretty strange substitutes for food and it can absorb water in different ways—but it can't do without air!

Supplying a rocket ship with air offers no really great problems. Since air is only one-fifth oxygen and four-fifths inert nitrogen, only the former need be renewed. It can be carried bottled, or in the form of a liquid, and perhaps it can even be manufactured from plant life living in hydroponic gardens aboard the spaceship.

Recently, however, research into high altitude flying has disclosed some interesting aspects of breathing which may alter some of our ideas on future air supply for

spaceships and settlements. Since air is one-fifth oxygen, which means it is at a pressure of three pounds per square inch, it is only the oxygen which is important. Would it be possible, scientists have asked, for high altitude flyers to breathe pure oxygen at three pounds pressure? Putting the idea to the test showed that it worked perfectly and now it is standard practice in using the oxygen mask to operate it at three pounds—with, of course, pure oxygen. Pure oxygen at fifteen pounds pressure is too consuming and tends literally to "burn" the lung tissue. But cut down, by a decrease in pressure, apparently human beings can breathe it indefinitely.

This possible solution to the air problem may have wide consequences in interplanetary settlement. It at once eliminates the necessity of hauling huge quantities of useless, wasteful inert gases to any shelters

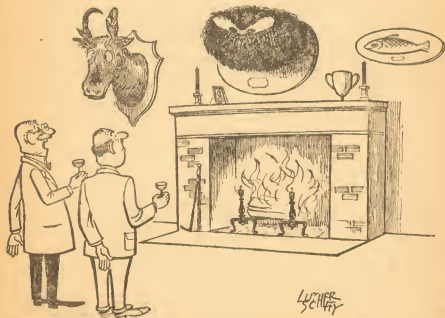
on the Moon—or Mars, or wherever else men may plant themselves. In addition another advantage is offered.

It is generally agreed that a space ship need be no stronger than necessary to hold its air pressure. Obviously the step-down from fifteen pounds per square inch to three pounds, is a big jump, and space-ships can be built even more flimsy than was first thought. Also leakage and air escape are cut down.

An additional bonus is offered to users of this low pressure oxygen in the form of simplified dome construction. As Clarke, the authority

on extra-terrestrial colonization remarks, settlements will tend to take the form of simple plastic domes, like cellophane bubbles, supported and extended by the pressure of oxygen within them. Clearly three pounds per square inch is as good as fifteen so far as supporting and distending the plastic domes go. And of course the plastic material can be that much flimsier since it too need resist such a lesser pressure.

All that remains is to prove that the body can endure pure low pressure oxygen indefinitely. And *that* appears a certainty!



"There's a rather gruesome little story about it—it's still alive!"

Late Arrival

by

A. Bertram Chandler

Jelks was a slow man, slow and methodical, the logical choice to sit alone up in the Space Station as an observer. So, when strange things happened below him, Jelks investigated — slowly!

Illustrated by W. E. Terry

HE was a big man, this Jelks — big, with a ruddy complexion, china blue eyes and thinning blond hair. He was a slow man — slow, but thorough. In the days of his not too far distant youth he had been told, often, by parents and teachers driven to and beyond the point of exasperation, that he would be late for his own funeral. On these frequent occasions he had smiled his slow, amiable smile and — the rebuke seemingly having failed to register — had plodded stolidly ahead with whatever had been the work in hand. In spite of his slowness—and because of his thoroughness—he had won scholarship after scholarship, had, whilst still in his early thirties, become the sort of scientist and mathematician ignored by the popular press but still pos-

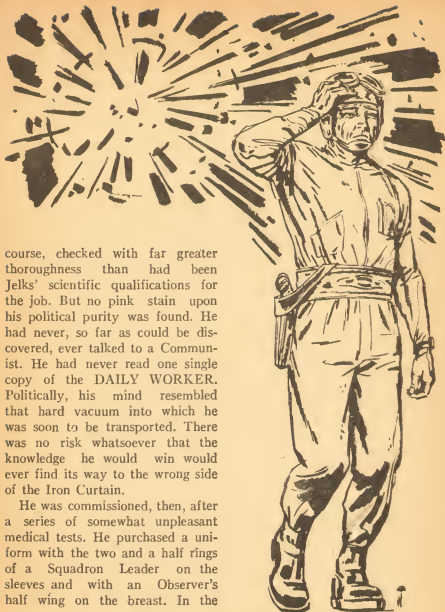
sessing a solid reputation among his academic peers.

"Jelks," old Professor Hartley had said, "will be the ideal man for the job. He's slow—I grant you that. He'll be late for his own funeral. But he's thorough. He'll be hanging up there for weeks—observing, monitoring, making out reports, cooped up in a tiny tin coffin. It'd drive some men nuts. It'd drive me nuts. Not Jelks: He'll monitor, and he'll observe, he'll make out and transmit his reports—and they'll be good, useful reports."

"I can take it, then, that you recommend him," said the Air Vice Marshal. "Of course, there's the security angle."

"That's up to you people," said the Professor.

The security angle was, of



course, checked with far greater thoroughness than had been Jelks' scientific qualifications for the job. But no pink stain upon his political purity was found. He had never, so far as could be discovered, ever talked to a Communist. He had never read one single copy of the DAILY WORKER. Politically, his mind resembled that hard vacuum into which he was soon to be transported. There was no risk whatsoever that the knowledge he would win would ever find its way to the wrong side of the Iron Curtain.

He was commissioned, then, after a series of somewhat unpleasant medical tests. He purchased a uniform with the two and a half rings of a Squadron Leader on the sleeves and with an Observer's half wing on the breast. In the

mess of the Station to which he had been posted he was just that—an observer, watching, with quiet wonderment, the fast young men with their split second reaction times who, with the careless ease of the young man in the song, flung their sleek jets and rockets about the sky. He met the crew who were to put the satellite up in its orbit, the technicians who were to build and assemble his extra-terrestrial laboratory for him around the nucleus of the third stage of the big step rocket. He was given the opportunity to learn something about rocket piloting himself.

"He'll never make a pilot," said the Flight Lieutenant. "He's slow. He's so slow that he'll be late for his own funeral."

"No cause to worry," said the Wing Commander. "He'll be taken out to the satellite; he'll be brought back."

With others of the team, Jelks was flown to Woomera. He stood with Air Marshals and Air Commodores and watched the big, three stage rocket lift on its glaring column of fire, dwindle to a vapor trail in the cloudless sky. He watched the blips on the screens, saw that the first and second steps were falling as predicted, that the third step had established itself in its orbit. He watched the second

rocket blast off—the one with equipment and technicians aboard, the one whose third step would bring back the crew of the first rocket. He did not, some weeks late, witness the blasting off of the third rocket (she was using the first and second stages of the first one) because he was in it.

HE took the acceleration well, did Jelks, and was unaffected by free fall. When the time came, he put on his spacesuit as unconcerned as if he had been dressing at his usual time in the morning in the bedroom of his Cambridge lodgings. He checked the various zippers and other fastenings with far less concern than a man heeding an admonitory notice in a public convenience. But even Jelks could not be unaffected by the spectacle visible outside the outer door of the airlock—the vast globe of Earth, green and brown and blue and silver, the space station, hanging seemingly motionless, with its spidery antennas and scanners, its solar mirrors, the big, inflated plastic sphere that had been the living and sleeping quarters for the assembly crew.

The speaker built into Jelks' helmet sputtered into life. "Doctor Jelks! Can you hear me? There's a lifeline rigged to the satellite."

"I've found it, thanks."

"Well, good luck, Doctor. See you in a week's time."

"Thanks, Brown. Don't forget to bring some newspapers."

Jelks pulled himself, hand over hand, to the airlock door of the space station. His clumsy, gloved hands manipulated the opening mechanism. He stood inside the tiny compartment waiting for the green light to glow. It came on, and he opened the inner door and drifted into his laboratory. Warren was there—another Squadron Leader—fully dressed except for his helmet. He helped Jelks to remove his, then said: "Here you are, Doctor. All ready for you. All tested and working."

"I'll take your word for it," said Jelks. He had come to know Warren, had recognized in him a thoroughness almost equal to his own.

"Exactly the same as the mock-up," said Warren.

"So I see."

"The transmitter's sealed, of course," Warren went on.

"Not to be used except in an emergency," said Jelks. "They told me. There's only one emergency I can think of. Did you ever work out the chances of being struck by a meteor?"

"No," said Warren. "But at times that plastic tent of ours out there seemed far too flimsy."

"Live in it for a hundred years," said Jelks, "and you *might* be hit by one large enough to do real damage. Well—all the best." His following words carried quotation marks fore and aft. "Happy landings."

"Be good," said Warren.

"And careful," said Jelks. He grinned. "Slow *and* careful. I know what they say about me. I just want to keep things that way."

He helped the other Squadron Leader on with his helmet, checked the fastenings of Warren's suit as meticulously as he had done those of his own. He drifted with him to the inner airlock door, watched the indicator lights until Warren was clear of the satellite and on his way to the waiting rocket. Jelks went, then, to one of the ports, watched the spaceship, now free of the lifeline, emit a brief, vivid jet of flame and slowly drop away from his field of vision. He took off the rest of his suit then, stowed it carefully in the locker designed for this purpose. For the next few hours he busied himself checking every smallest detail of the life sustaining apparatus of his spatial laboratory. After he had done this he prepared for his first test, his first experiments. He was a happy man—weeks of highly interesting work lay ahead of him and there was no urgency. Neither lack

of gravity nor absence of company bothered him.

AT the end of a week the rocket made its rendezvous with the space station. Brown—the Flight Lieutenant who was captain of the little spaceship—came across himself on the lifeline, brought with him the promised newspapers. He took with him recordings made by the instruments, also Jelks' first report. He said, "I don't think that the news has leaked out yet. When our friends on the other side of the Curtain *do* find out there's going to be a mass liquidation of astronomers."

"Anything in these?" asked Jelks, patting the bundle of newspapers.

"There's Jane of course—but she hasn't been the same girl since the purity drive set in . . . Overdressed in every installment. Talking of purity drives—some crank reckons that the End of the World is at hand."

"Then it's high time that we pushed ahead with the Interplanetary Project," said Jelks.

"What do you think you're out here for?" asked the Flight Lieutenant.

After the spaceship had gone, Jelks settled down with his newspapers. There was even less haste than there had been before—it

would be all of six weeks before the next rendezvous. He read the news items with an attitude of godlike detachment. He did the crossword puzzles. The listed radio programs reminded him that not once had he used the receiver that was part of the station's equipment. He resolved that from now on he would, at least, keep up with the news. He read the accounts of the meetings at which the self-styled Prophet John had spoken, marvelled that in this day and age, the age of atomic power and space travel, anybody should subscribe to this mystical clap-trap. Then he went back to work.

It was two days before the rocket was due that Jelks was making a series of observations of Earth from the station. He was over the night hemisphere sliding swiftly in his South-North orbit while the great, shadowed globe turned slowly beneath him. The sky was clear above South America and Jelks could see the city lights—Buenos Aires, Rio, Santiago. He was surprised when the darkness swept suddenly over the tiny, glimmering sparks that were the homes of men, thought at first that the fault lay in his instruments. It was over North America that he saw the golden glow and the thousand mile long lightnings. His vehicle carried him over the

Pole and south over the sunlit hemisphere. But neither land nor sea could be distinguished—all Earth was obscured by an impenetrable layer of dense black cloud.

It must be, thought Jelks, some meteorological phenomenon. He was a physicist and a good one, and he knew of no weapon that could have produced such an effect. On the other hand—and he felt the beginnings of cold, sickening fear—he was also a meteorologist of sorts, and he knew of no meteorological explanation for what he was seeing. Slowly, unhurriedly (he refused to hurry) he switched on the receiver. Slowly, unhurriedly, he tried waveband after waveband. The set was dead. Slowly, unhurriedly, Jelks took photographs of the black ball over which he swung in his orbit, jotted down in his log what he had seen—the obscuration of the city lights, the golden glow and the dreadful lightnings. Again he returned to the radio and this time, but all too briefly, caught what seemed to be a broadcast of some great choir, somewhere. It was the merest echo, and in spite of all his care and skill he was unable to bring the controls of the set back to the right setting.

He was tired then—a tiredness that came, he knew, more from strain than from overwork.

I can do nothing, he thought. He put his cameras on automatic control, then strapped himself into his bunk. He slept—a deep sleep untroubled by dream or nightmare.

WHEN he awoke he went straight to the most convenient port, looked down to the world. He was over the sunlit hemisphere again and Europe was below him. The black overcast was gone. Over Russia there was smoke—it was, he thought, a forest fire, covering thousands of square miles. He turned his telescope first on London. London still stood—there were no craters, no fires. Paris, Berlin, Rome, Moscow—all were seemingly, untouched. After a while he was able to see the cities of the Southern Hemisphere, and he saw nothing to arouse his apprehension. But there was a bush fire in Australia and, within in his field of view some time later, another forest fire in Canada.

The radio was still dead.

His chronometers told him that it lacked minutes of his rendezvous with the rocket from Woomera. His chronometers told him that the rocket from Woomera should now be alongside the space station—but space was empty. His chronometers told him that the rocket from Woomera was all of two hours

overdue.

"I was hoping that Brown would be able to tell me something," he muttered to himself as he broke the seals on the transmitter. He hesitated before switching on. Was this an emergency? He decided to give Brown another hour, and filled in the time by hunting vainly up and down the wavebands of his transmitter.

He switched on the set, waited for it to warm up. His fingers reached out for the key. "James calling Rosie Bell," he sent in the pre-arranged code, on the agreed wavelength. "James calling Rosie Bell. I am worried." He sent again, "James calling Rosie Bell. James calling Rosie Bell." Again he sent, "James calling Rosie Bell. James calling . . . James calling . . ."

He broke out the emergency brandy bottle. Moving slowly and methodically, never forgetting to allow for the conditions of free fall, he managed to take a drink without wasting a drop of the fluid. Suddenly he felt lost and lonely, and Earth very dear and very far away. Somehow, for no reason, he remembered the thing that had always been said about him - that he would be late for his own funeral. *Unless I get back to Earth*, he thought, *I shan't have one.*

He put on his spacesuit, went

outside. He studied the exterior of the station. The wings were still there—it had been worth nobody's while to remove them. The solar mirrors, the various antennae and the telescope tubes were removable. The rocket motor was, he knew, still workable, and there was fuel. It would not be an impossible task to convert the station into what it had originally been—a replica of the rocket whose rendezvous was now hours overdue.

Jelks worked slowly and carefully. He stripped the rocket of all aerodynamically undesirable excrescences. He then reduced weight by the jettison of equipment and fittings from the interior. The records he kept, also the Geiger Counter. Then, strapped to his desk in the strangely bare and spacious cabin of the station, he worked out his flight plan. Then, satisfied that nothing had been left unnecessarily to chance, he secured himself in the pilot's seat and fired the braking blast. The huddle of dumped instruments and machinery dropped away from the station. Jelks allowed himself briefly to wonder whether it would ever be picked up and used again.

Then the station had to be turned—a simple enough task using the built-in manually operated flywheel. Jelks sat at the controls—waiting. He allowed himself one

experimental wiggle of the control surfaces, but no more. He did not allow his eyes to stray from the Air Speed Indicator, ever alert for the first warning quiver of the needle.

HIS reaction times were slow, but then, even at his initial supersonic speed, he had to come down a long way. Through the first high cirrus he swept, and the temperature inside the ship rose to an uncomfortable level. He hoped that the refrigerating unit would prove equal to the strain. Out of sunlight into darkness he swept—and saw the lights of cities and of vast fires beneath him. Out of darkness into sunlight he screamed—and there was the sea, and ships, and the European coastline. Down, he spiralled, down, down. He felt the wrenching shock as his first ribbon parachute took hold and then was wrenched from the fuselage.

A less slow man would have fought the controls, would have striven grimly for mastery of the machine in which he rode. Not Jelks. He knew his limitations; he knew, too, the excellence of the design of the ship. He knew that she would, almost, land herself without damage. His main anxiety was that the landing should take place on a site of his own selection.

Gently, carefully, he eased the ship down, determined not to repeat the mistake that had lost him one of his parachutes. Gently, carefully he brought her round in a wide arc, round again in a smaller one. England was beneath him—cities and towns and green fields. London was beneath him, then the seaside towns of the South Coast and the blue-green waters of the Channel. Ships he saw in the narrow sea, but there were no aircraft in the air. He thought it strange that no investigatory jets or rockets had been sent up to intercept and challenge.

Lower he spiralled, lower. He could see traffic on the roads now. He could not be sure—the speed at which he was still travelling made accurate observation impossible—but the cars, the coaches and the trucks seemed to be stationary. At one crossroads he glimpsed an untidy huddle of machines, saw the black scar of fire on grass verge and hedgerows.

At last he was over the Station to which he had first been posted. The long runway was clear. Remembering his radio, he called the tower. There was no reply. He looked down to the windsock and saw that his line of approach could not be bettered. He lowered his undercarriage, released the last of his braking parachutes. The con-

crete was sweeping beneath him with terrifying speed. One wheel of the undercarriage touched, bounced, touched again. The ship heeled over, the tip of his port delta wing dug into the concrete. Landing strip and administration buildings wheeled before him, around him. Something struck the back of his head and he took no further interest in the details of the landing.

HIS first waking thought was to wonder who would have to pay for all the damage that he had done. "One Space Station, complete," he muttered. "That'll make a nasty hole in a month's pay . . ." He realized, slowly, that he was hanging upside down in his securing straps. Before releasing himself he worked things out in his methodical manner, snapped open the catches so that he was able to ease himself gently down on to his shoulders. A clumsy, slow-motion somersault brought him to a sitting posture.

The airlock doors were hopelessly jammed, but it didn't matter. The cabin was so wrenched and battered that it was easy for him to force his way out at the minor cost of a slightly lacerated hand and a badly torn trouser knee. The unaccustomed gravity made him feel heavy and tired;

for all of five minutes he stood beside the wreckage of the rocket waiting for somebody to come out to him. Somewhere a dog—one of the Station's Alsations? — was barking hysterically.

Slowly, he walked towards the Mess Hall. *If there were anybody in Administration, he thought, they'd have seen me come in. They couldn't have missed it.* He noticed that the Alsatian he had heard barking was trailing him, keeping well back. He wished that he had a weapon of some kind—there was something mad about the appearance of the brute.

All doors in the Station were open. Jelks went first to the bar—hungry, uncharacteristically, for company. The bar was deserted. There were four pint tankards standing on the counter, each perhaps two thirds full. The beer was stale and flat, and had dead flies in it. In another glass—a Martini? — a wasp was drowned. Jelks went behind the bar, found a glass, poured himself a stiff whisky. After it he felt better. He picked up a 'newspaper on one of the tables, looked at the date. It was a Sunday paper. It was the day that he had seen the golden glow and the supernal lightnings, the day of the impenetrable black overcast.

Jelks stood there and shouted.

"Anybody at home? Is anybody at home?" Only the barking of the half mad Alsatian outside answered him. "Is anybody here?" bellowed Jelks.

Jelks went into the pantry adjoining the dining room, found a stale loaf of bread and some butter that wasn't quite rancid. He opened a tin of sardines, made a filling yet unsatisfying meal. He watched the flies that came to feast on the crumbs on his plate almost with affection. *Dogs, he thought, and flies. And I heard a bird singing . . . It can't be radio-active dust . . . There shouldn't be any need to get the Geiger counter from the ship. It's probably smashed, anyhow.*

He stiffened abruptly as he heard a new sound—then relaxed. It was the sound of bells, it was the church clock in the village, two miles distant, striking the hour. In the still air the sound carried well; yet, somehow, was tenuous, could have been some ghostly carillon pealing in the almost airless depths of a Lunar crater.

"I will go the village," said Jelks—to the flies, to the air, to the barking dog outside, to nobody in particular. He picked up the remains of the loaf, took it with him. "Here!" he said to the dog. The Alsatian stopped barking, looked at Jelks suspiciously. The man

threw the bread down gently, watched the dog as it sniffed the food and then began to eat ravenously. He waited until it had finished eating, then said, "Come on, boy." The dog followed him, close to heel, but only as far as the gates.

So Jelks had to walk alone to the village. After the first half mile he regretted that he had never learned to drive—he could have had his pick of the Station cars, of the abandoned vehicles along the road. The sun was high in the cloudless sky and he was perspiring inside his uniform. His feet were tender in the thin, canvas shoes that had been his footwear in the space station. Yet, in spite of his discomfort, he was able to watch, to observe, to see the animals in the fields, the birds in the sky and in the hedgerows. He was able to *feel*—able to sense the impalpable something that Chesterton has called so aptly "the smell of Sunday morning." But it was not a Sunday.

HE was footsore and weary when he reached the village. On the window ledge of the first cottage a fat, tortoise-shell cat regarded him gravely. Jelks put out his hand to touch the animal, to stroke it. It responded to his advances with feline courtesy but without much enthusiasm. Jelks

left the cat to its own devices, knocked on the cottage door. There was no reply. He opened the door, went inside. A smell of burning still lingered in the kitchen—the fire was out, but the Sunday roast was a mess of charred, acrid stinking meat. On the oven the saucepans in which the vegetables had been boiling were dry and their contents ruined. On the kitchen table was a half finished cup of tea—in which floated the inevitable drowned, bedraggled flies.

It must have been a disaster of some kind, thought Jelks. I shall find them in the church . . . He left the cottage, walked slowly along the street to the tall, grey spire. His mind conjured up images of what he would find there—huddled corpses, victims of some fearful weapon produced by the biochemists. He walked more slowly than was justified by his sore feet.

The church was empty. The

sunlight struck through the stained glass of the windows, a patina of rainbow coloring on altar and altar cloth, reflected by dull gleaming metal. But there was damage. In places the stone flooring of the aisle had been ripped up, the underlying earth scattered untidily and carelessly. The man (the last man, the only man) stared uncomprehendingly at this—he thought vandalism, then walked slowly out through the side door to the graveyard.

There, in the warm sunlight, he gazed at the overturned headstones, the heaped and scattered earth, the odd, terrifying craters. He began to laugh—quietly at first, then with mounting hysteria. Abruptly he stopped and stood there, scarcely breathing, straining his ears to try to catch some faint echo of the trumpet that once (and once only) had sounded, the trumpet that he would never hear.

★ *Time Is Too Short!* ★

A remarkably startling concept has been suggested by an astrophysicist, and the world of astronomy is giving it quite serious consideration. The conception is simple: cosmologists who study the origin and end of the universe are making a fundamental mistake. The known history of Mankind, at the very longest, extends over a span

of time no longer than a hundred thousand years. Written records cover only a tenth of this period. In astronomical terms this is but an *instant of time*. How, asks the astrophysicist, can you reasonably expect to extrapolate from this moment of time to eons past and future?

It is, he says, much like an ant

attempting to construct the history of a forest in light of its minute and insignificant experience. What does that ant know of the infinitely complex surrounding acre much less of the forest and the myriad other inhabitants? Granting the ant intelligence, could it conceive of an Earth, much less a Solar System?

So impressed has the astronomical world been by this idea that already scientists are calling for a re-examination of cosmogony. We know ten thousand years of history. We have observed the stars that long. But that ten thousand years is but an instant in time as stars and galaxies go. From this brief experience we are attempting to

deduce a Past and Future to an overwhelmingly huge universe. Is our method or our picture valid?

Naturally some maintain that the success of the scientific method on mundane things, shows it is. But that is the very point: can we extend this to such an overwhelming length of time as the universe must have experienced? The proposition just cited has caused considerable re-capitulation on the part of scientists. The world may not be what it seems—in fact, it probably isn't at all. Whatever the outcome is, it is certain that a complete re-examination of cosmological ideas must be made — Man's Time has only been what can be measured as a second or two . . .



"... and by now these daring adventurers must be well into space, on their way to exciting discoveries in our vast solar system . . ."

After ten years on Venus Gunar Stagg was returning home to Earth; but when he arrived at the satellite station he was refused entry by —

The Doormen Of Space

by

S. M. Jenneshaw

This story is dedicated to the men of the E. S. C. — the Earth Satellite Corps — who through their tireless efforts and quiet heroism have helped pave the pathway to the stars . . . and back again.

AT first disbelief was the huge man's chief emotion. He stood rock-strong on legs like Doric columns and stared at the speaker on the clean white anti-septic wall of the quarantine section of Station One. He said nothing but rocked forward slowly on the balls of his feet, thrusting the bull-neck and the big homely head closer to the little box on the wall.

For all his massive size, his voice was surprisingly soft, almost diffident. "What did you say?" he finally asked.

There was a click in the speaker on the wall, then a voice as coldly

lacking in emotion as space is coldly lacking in color and sound addressed the big man with a recapitulation of the message he had just heard.

"When the door opens, patient will proceed down the corridor to room 13-B, there to undergo initial treatment for Hutchley's Disease."

"But I want to go home. I want to go down to Earth," the huge man said in a constrained whisper. "Ten years on Venus, that's what I had. Don't you think that's enough? Don't you think I've had enough of space? It's Earth I want: the cool breezes and the way the trees lose their leaves in fall and how —" It was a long speech, an unaccustomed speech for the big man. His voice trailed

Illustrated by Kelly Frens



off as the machine interrupted him.

"Your wishes must remain subordinate to the safety and health of the people of Earth. As a victim of Hutchley's Disease —"

"Hutchley's Disease like hell!" the big man roared, his voice booming like thunder. "Look at me, damn you. Do I look like I have Hutchley's Disease? Look at these muscles, damn it! Have they gone slack? Do they look like the muscles of a man with Hutch? Look at my eyes. I'm telling you, I can see straight and clear as any man. I want to go to Earth, understand?"

"In the routine physical examination given to all returnees, a smear of your blood was examined for Hutchley's Disease and the other known virulent extra-terrestrial diseases. Positive traces of the Hutchley-causing virus were found in your blood. Since Hutch, as it is called colloquially, is more than ten times as virulent as any comparable terrestrial disease and since a victim may often walk around in apparent good health for days or weeks while capable of carrying the disease latently in its most virulent form, you are hereby notified for the third time that under the provisions of Public Safety Law 165 you are placed in quarantine here on Satellite One pending the outcome of medical treatment. Proceed to

Room 13-B1!"

"A lot of goddam double talk is what!" the big man growled. Fear and anger had replaced disbelief on his face by this time, twisting the already homely features into a grim, ugly mask. "I said I'm going to Earth and you can't stop me. I waited and I dreamed so long, I just got to go down to Earth. A man, he can take so much of space and then he's kind of used up inside. Don't you see? Don't you understand? I ain't got Hutch. Wouldn't I know if I had? I been around. I would know."

As he spoke, the fear he felt mastered the anger. His voice grew soft and almost plaintive. But when he had finished a speech which was unaccustomedly long for him and was answered by the machine with silence, his anger returned.

The silence lasted for the space of two dozen heartbeats. Then the giant of a man shook his fist at the speaking-box and cried: "I'm going to Earth and neither you or anybody else is going to stop me. Understand?"

The machine hummed but otherwise remained silent.

"**WHO'S THE ANGRY** big guy?" Michael Furness asked his chief in the viewing room.

With a dozen other Corpsmen of Earth Satellite One, men dedi-

cated to their strange lonely service five thousand miles above the surface of the Earth on an immense wheel-shaped artificial satellite a mile in diameter, Furness was seated before a bank of television screens which reproduced on one large wall an image of each of Satellite One's forty-odd Trouble Rooms. Michael Furness was a man still in his mid twenties. Walking the streets of any city on Earth he would have looked normal enough on first look, but a careful scrutiny would have revealed something of the dedicated missionary's zeal in his eyes. The purple and gold uniform of the E. S. C. — once what was in Furness' eyes could be seen and understood — would come as no surprise.

Furness' superior officer was a graying middle-aged man named Amos Burt. His eyes, unlike Furness', were cold and bleak and surprisingly sad, as if they had seen all the trouble of all the people who had been scooped up by the giant, impersonal but almost perfect mechanism of Station One and deposited for one reason or another in the Trouble Rooms. Even the comforting statistics — which told you that only one space-returnee in five hundred ever saw the inside of a Trouble Room — had not seemed to take the cold, tragic look from Amos Burt's eyes. For Burt had for

twenty years been shepherd to that one in five hundred, had seen them through quarantine and customs, through sickness, insanity and sometimes through their final hours to death.

Burt checked his Trouble Room Listing and answered Michael Furness' question. "Name's Gunar Stagg. Hutch positive, Mike. He can't go home. He stays here on One until he either dies or gets cured."

"What are the odds?"

"About fifty fifty, I'd say."

"I feel sorry for the big guy," Furness said. "He must really want to feel the ground of Earth under his feet again."

"Don't they all? Don't *we* all?"

"That's different, chief. We —"

"Well, never mind about us. Stagg and the people like him are our problem. Take Stagg, now. He's defiant. He says he won't surrender to treatment. Pick up one of the strong arm boys on your way down to Trouble Spoke, Mike. If Stagg tries anything, stop him. Kill him if you have to." —

"Kill him? But for crying out loud, chief —"

"I said kill him. Do you think I like it? Maybe Stagg's a great guy. It doesn't matter, and you won't make a first-rate E. S. C. man until you realize that. The safety of Earth's population is our first concern. If Stagg really goes berserk

and decides to stow away aboard one of the inbound ferries, what happens then? Would you like to see Hutchley's disease loose on Earth? It's virulent like nothing else is, Mike. I guarantee you this: give one man with Hutch a week on Earth and despite all our modern medical science humanity will face its gravest crisis since the black plague swept across Europe in the middle ages. Would you want that to happen?"

"Of course not, chief. But —"

"Then go down there and stop Hutch. Any way you have to."

Hutch. Somehow that was better. Stop Hutch. There was nothing about Stagg now. Stagg did not matter. Gunar Stagg was only a name. Maybe Gunar Stagg was a great guy, but it didn't matter. Stagg was a statistic. Less than a statistic and absolutely expendable if the welfare of Earth's population hung in the balance.

Don't stop Stagg. Stop Hutchley's Disease. Stop Hutch, Michael Furness. And if that means stopping Gunar Stagg too and perhaps killing him, you had better not think about that.

Very sober-faced and beginning to understand what had put the bleakness in Amos Burt's eyes, Furness walked swiftly along the corridor which would take him first to Strong Arm Spoke and then to Trouble Spoke.

"WHEN the door opens," the mechanical speaker informed Gunar Stagg, "two armed Earth Satellite Corpsmen will be waiting for you. Please do not resist. While it is true that everything done here is first and foremost for the good of Earth's population, it will also be done in this case for your own good. There are no facilities for the cure of Hutchley's Disease on Earth. Here on Satellite One there are such facilities. So you see —"

"Shut up!" Gunar Stagg roared.

"You and your no good double talk. Shut up, I tell you. I'm not going anywheres with anybody. I want to go down. Down to Earth is where I want to go. You ain't none of you going to stop me."

Stagg took a deep breath, swelling his massive chest, and faced the door definitely. Sweat beaded his forehead and felt clammy on his palms. Outside in the corridor, he thought he heard footsteps echoing softly on the metallic floor.

"It's like a dream, see?" he pleaded with no one in particular. "Coming back to Earth. Hell yeah, I know I didn't have to stay on Venus no ten years. But I stayed. Ten years is more than a man ought to. Oh, Venus is all right I guess. There ain't nothing wrong with Venus. It's only this: Venus or noplacelse is like Earth or any-

thing like Earth. Something inside a man dies, if he stays away too long. That's why I'm going down now. That's why I got to go down. You can't stop me. You'll only hurt yourselves if you try."

It was the second long speech Gunar Stagg had made and like everything else which had happened since he had been removed from Medical Spoke to Trouble Spoke of the wheel-shaped space station, it confused him. A feeling of desperation welled up within him. He felt it bottled there, threatening to explode. It wasn't his fault. They. It was them. Their fault. The impersonal, non-existent "they" we all blame for the troubles we can't solve. The "they" which includes police and medical authorities and tax men and rivals in business or love and a few dozen other categories. The "they" which could become personalized and individualized for a man in Gunar Stagg's frame of mind into the men opening the door of the Trouble Room at that very moment.

As the door began to slide into the wall, Stagg thudded quickly across the room toward it. Speed he thought. Speed would surprise them. They would expect confusion, indecision. Speed could defeat them.

Stagg slipped through and confronted his adversaries while the door was still sliding. There were

only two of them, he noticed with surprise. He had expected more. He smiled, and still smiling charged at them.

The younger of the two men, dressed in the uniform of the E. S. C., clawed at his belt for a weapon. The second man, garbed in Army kahki, stood immediately behind the first in the narrow corridor and was not at the moment an immediate threat. Gunar Stagg permitted the first man to take the weapon — it was a hand-blaster — from his belt. As it came up the narrow, innocent-looking bore pointing first at Stagg's knees, then his groin, then his mid-section, the big man exploded into activity.

The hard-boned edge of his huge hand sliced down in a blurring motion and struck the Corpsman's wrist. Instantly the blaster fell and Stagg was down after it almost before it hit the metal floor of the corridor.

THE Corpsman went down after him, but Gunar Stagg was almost seven feet tall and weighed two hundred and forty pounds. He clubbed the Corpsman once across the side of his face and watched the slender youngster roll away from him, inert and unconscious.

"All right, fellow!" the soldier raged, facing Stagg with another

blaster. "Don't try anything like that again. If you move a muscle, I'll kill you."

His side of the grim argument reduced at least temporarily to one, the soldier meant what he said but expected a reflective delay, even if only for the barest fraction of a second, from his antagonist. Instead, Gunar Stagg launched himself instantly across the body of the unconscious Corpsman and toward the soldier.

The blaster roared just before he could touch it with his groping hand.

He felt an enormity of pain, a blinding, searing intensity of raw energy ripping through the fibers of his arm. The arm — it was his right arm — swung down abruptly like a lead weight. It remained attached to his shoulder but did not seem to be part of him. It swung limp and yet strangely stiff like a tree-branch which somehow had been attached there.

He was on the soldier before the blaster could be fired a second time. He drove his sound left shoulder into the soldier's midsection and the man folded, head and chest and flailing arms above Stagg's shoulder, the rest of him below. That way, Stagg drove him to the floor, where they grappled for possession of the blaster.

Stagg was bigger and stronger but he had lost the use of his right

arm and anyway the soldier was no weakling. They fought in silence except for their harsh breathing and the drumming sound their boots made against the metal floor of the corridor and the gleaming, polished bulkheads. Slowly, inevitably because all his massive strength had flowed into his sound left arm, Stagg gained possession of the blaster. As he did so the Corpsman whom he had all but forgotten was climbing unsteadily to his feet. His eyes had not yet regained their focus but that would only take seconds. Which meant seconds were all the time Stagg had left to him.

He had the blaster now, but did not want to kill the soldier. He had nothing against the soldier, provided the khaki-uniformed man no longer posed a threat to his return to Earth. He reversed the blaster and brought it down toward the man's head.

But the soldier chose that moment to leap at Stagg. The result was a very much harder contact between blaster and bone and flesh than had been intended. The soldier stood there for a moment, swaying, and then collapsed on his back. Incredulously, Stagg stared at him. A triangle of skin and flesh had come loose on the soldier's face, starting at the right cheekbone and baring teeth and gums in a bloody smear all the

way to the base of the jaw. Something fleshy clung to the blaster Stagg held in his hand.

Briefly he got down on his knees and touched the ridiculous, impossible triangle of loose flesh from which blood was flowing. He got up with a dazed look on his face and swung the blaster again, catching the charging Corpsman a glancing blow across the side of the head. The Corpsman swung around and went down a second time, across the soldier's legs.

Once more Gunar Stagg looked at the soldier's ruined face again. "I didn't mean nothing like that!" he cried. "Oh, Christ, I didn't mean nothing like that."

Then he fled. His pounding footsteps took him, although he did not realize it at the time, toward Station One's Ferry Spoke. Under the circumstances, the Ferry Spoke was ideal. Station One, which handled traffic inbound for Earth's northern hemisphere, was always crowded. Once a public or a private ferry had been cleared by Customs and Medical, it was assigned a berth in Ferry Spoke, pending the time the Station soared above the desired northern hemisphere location on Earth. Then the ferry blasted off and more often than not a new one was there to take its place in the crowded slips. Naturally, if a ferry missed its blast-off time, it would have to wait

until the Station made a complete circuit of the northern hemisphere again. The result on the busy Station's time-table would be chaotic—and, repeated with a sufficient number of ferries could even be dangerous. For then the big spacers would have to remain clear of Station One to allow room to juggle and rejuggle the congested Earth ferries. And the spacers, almost exhausted of fuel, ponderous, ungainly at the outer fringes of Earth's lower level gravity field, might hurtle out of control and to fiery meteoric destruction on the Earth five thousand miles below.

All this Gunar Stagg did not know as, fear-crazed, he fled along the corridor to the adjacent Spoke. The Ferry Spoke . . .

AMOS Burt put his hand on Furness' shoulder. "Are you all right, Mike?"

"He took me like a baby," Furness groaned. "How's Sergeant Higgins?"

"They rushed him to Medical Spoke. Hard to say, Mike. He lost a lot of blood."

"Stagg was sorry," Furness said. "I never saw anything like it. You should have seen Stagg's face. He —"

"Maybe he was sorry," Burt said dryly. "But not as sorry as Higgins' wife is going to be when she gets the news."

"Will he live?"

"I don't know if he'll live or if he won't live but damn it, Mike, when are you going to learn that even that's not what you should be thinking of? Stagg is loose, man. With Hutchley's disease. We were able to trace him as far as the Ferry Spoke, but that's all. We don't have TV equipment in Ferry Spoke. We used to, but it was declared unconstitutional. Unconstitutional, that's a laugh, isn't it? Unconstitutional with maybe ten million lives at stake if Stagg ever reaches Earth."

"Why don't you quarantine the whole Station, chief? There's a chance Stagg is spreading Hutch here on the Station anyway."

"I consulted the Medical authorities about that. They give a negative diagnosis, thank God."

"I don't get it."

"Time, Mike. Hutch takes time. It's deadly contagious, but with contact figured in hours, not minutes. Even then, two out of every three people have natural immunity to it, Lord knows why, since Hutch is native to Venus. Anyhow, the combination of two-thirds natural immunity and the time-element makes it unnecessary to quarantine the whole Station, at least for several hours. After that, if Stagg isn't found, there's no telling what might happen."

"What about the ship he came

in on?"

"He was a loner, in a battered old lifetub."

"After how many hours will we have to put the whole Station on quarantine, chief?"

"I asked the Medics to run it through their Norberts and come up with an answer, but they haven't yet. Hell, Furness, I'm in no hurry to get that answer, either. Can you imagine the pandemonium if we have to call halt on Station One? With all those ships piling up outside and no berths and —"

"So, we better find Stagg."

"Yeah, we better find him."

"But if you're not quarantining the Station and not even Ferry Slip, Stagg can hide away on one of the ferries and go down to Earth."

"Maybe. I'm betting he can't though. I'm betting we'll be able to stop him because each ferry has its own slip and its own blast-off time. Each ferry will be searched as zero-minute approaches. That way —"

"It's a pretty big risk, chief."

"Don't talk to me about risks. I've been living with risks for twenty years."

"No. I mean if Stagg brings Hutchley's Disease to Earth millions of lives will be at stake."

"And if I call quarantine for the whole Station, thousands of

lives will be at stake up there in the liners piling up without berths. Don't you think I know it? Don't you think I'm aware of the alternatives? Don't you —"

"I'll find Stagg, chief."

"You better take it easy, Mike. The medics want you to rest for a day or so. I've already got every available man on it. One more man wouldn't mean much."

"Listen," Furness cried, forgetting Amos Burt was his superior officer. "You know what you can do with what the medics said. It was me who let Stagg get away. If anything happens, it's my fault. I've got to go down there, don't you see? I can't just hang around because the medics think I need a little rest."

Burt stared at the younger man for a few slow seconds, studying him. "And if I ordered you to stay in your quarters, Corpsman?"

Furness shook his head slowly. "It wouldn't matter."

Slowly, the lines of Burt's bleak face eased into a grin. "That's what I thought, Corpsman," he said. "That's what I was hoping. He grinned again. "Pick up your Ferry schedule at the briefing room and hustle on down to Ferry Slip. And that's an order!"

No one, Burt least of all, expected Furness to salute. And he did not. He merely turned on his heel and sprinted toward the brief-

ing room down the corridor.

FERRY Slip F-11 stood near the rim of the Station on the sunward side of the Ferry Spoke. It was a small slip near the rim of the wheel-like station, for private ferries. It could accommodate hundred tonners, maximum. Nothing very dramatic happened at Ferry Slip F-11. The dramatic, the important, was reserved for larger slips, closer to the hub of Station One. F-11 and the other slips like it were for the mildly successful prospectors who had returned Earthward from the asteroids, for the small businessmen who had closed up shop on Mars or the Jovian moons, for the small privately-endowed exploration ships which no longer merited headlines and whose companies returned without fanfare to Earth while the battered old exploration ships themselves were powered to their own Earth orbits, there to be overhauled by space monkeys until they were needed again.

When Gunar Stagg fled into Ferry Spoke, Ferry Slip F-11 berthed a twenty-seven ton ferry close to fifty years old. It was called Little Maiden III for some obscure reason, perhaps because — like the Little Maidens before it — it had never and would never take the plunge into deep space. Little Maiden III was owned and

operated by the Glenn-Healy Space Associates, a non-scheduled outfit which also had a fleet of six deep-space ships, all of them freighters which could also accommodate — but rarely did — a small number of passengers.

The Martian Ladybird, inbound six hours before from Mars with a payload of iron ore, had also carried six passengers. The iron ore was by now enroute to North America in an unmanned rocket; the Martian Ladybird, with three of its passengers who were transshipping for Venus, was enroute to its Earth orbit; and the other three now awaiting blast-off in the ferry Little Maiden III.

"Tired?" Al Dugan asked his wife. He was always asking her that, but she didn't mind. He had been injured severely and faced a life of almost total inactivity as a result of a mining accident on Mars and the question was by way of diverting similar questions from himself.

"I'm not tired, honey," Nancy Dugan said. "I had plenty of rest on the trip in. I'm raring to go."

"Well, with a cripple for a husband, you'd better be," Dugan said bitterly.

"You are *not* a cripple. It was only temporary, the doctors said."

"Maybe they said. Don't kid me, Nancy. If we've got to face it, we've got to. How's Sandy?"

"He's inside listening to the Station radio. You know how much he goes for that stuff. He makes believe he's a Corpsman."

"Maybe he will be, someday."

Just then the Dugans' eight year old son Sandy called from the ferry's other small cabin, where the automatic pilot and the radio were located. "Hey, pop! You should hear."

"What is it, Sandy?"

"Guy's escaped with the Hutch. They think he's in the Ferry Spoke and everything. They're sending guys around to search. Real Corpsmen."

The enthusiasm in his son's voice was so contagious that Al Dugan soon found himself rolling his wheel chair into the other cabin where he could listen to the squawking radio with his son and watch the boy's happy, animated face. The bitterness was a new thing for Dugan. He found himself fighting it successfully most of the time, but it worried him because it encroached more all the time. He did not think he would ever grow used to being a cripple.

"Just listen to this, Pop," Sandy cried enthusiastically, and for the next fifteen minutes or so Dugan listened to the Station Radio with his son.

They were interrupted by a pounding on the airlock door of Little Maiden III.

"The Corpsmen!" Sandy cried happily.

As a matter of fact, it was Gunar Stagg.

THE DOOR WAS opened for Stagg by a skinny kid with sandy-colored hair and a smile of happy expectation on his face. At least Stagg thought he was smiling: in the past hour or so something had happened to Stagg's vision and he couldn't be sure. He could still see, but only through a strange curtain of gray concentric circles which persisted even when his eyes were shut. He recognized this as one probable symptom of Hutchley's Disease. Anyone who had lived ten years on Venus knew the syndrome well enough. Still, Stagg tried to convince himself that the strange trick of vision was due to other causes.

The smile dropped like a dead weight on the surface of Jupiter from the sandy-haired kid's face. "You're not a Corpsman!" he blurted.

Shaking his head, Stagg pushed his way into the airlock of the little ferry.

"They said what you looked like over the radio, mister. You—you're Gunar Stagg!"

"What's up, Sandy?" a woman's voice called.

Stagg waved a blaster at the boy. "You tell her its the Corps-

men, if you know what's good," he hissed.

"Hey, mister, you ought to give yourself up, like they said on the radio."

Stagg rested his enormous bulk against the airlock wall. He held the blaster clumsily in his big left hand; his right arm hung straight and limp from his shoulder. "Just tell her like I said!"

"They hurt your arm? My mom used to be a nurse," the boy said proudly. "Maybe she can fix it."

"Maybe you better do what I told you," Stagg said almost desperately. He had never known how to deal with children. They always confused and even frightened him. Sometimes they seemed to know so unexpectedly much they almost seemed smarter than grown people. Stagg waited for the boy to answer him. He did not want to hurt these people. If the boy had refused or ignored the command once more, Stagg might have fled. He had nothing against these people. He did not want to hurt them. But he wanted with all the fire in his soul to return to Earth.

Sandy, though, did not refuse. He was scared and tried not to show it. The injured fugitive confronting him now was practically a giant. The radio had said he was desperate, armed, and possibly by this time delirious with the first onslaught of Hutchley's Disease.

When Sandy's mother called again, "Well, what is it, Sandy?" the boy answered:

"Corpsmen looking around, I guess," in a subdued voice.

A moment later, Al Dugan's wheel chair came wheeling out into the airlock cabin. "If it was the Corpsmen," he said, "you wouldn't have said it like that. So what's going on—"

"Take it easy, mister," Stagg said in a deep but unsteady voice. "Just take it easy and nobody's going to get hurt. I'm here because I want to go down to Earth and—"

"I know all about you," Dugan said coldly. "You're willing to jeopardize the safety of millions of people to satisfy your own craving."

"Craving? It's my whole life, mister. I'd rather die than not go down there, and that's the truth."

Just then Nancy Dugan joined her husband. She stood behind the wheel chair and leaned slightly over its back, staring without fear at Gunar Stagg. "But don't you see," she said, "if you go down there you will die. They have no facilities for Hutchley's Disease on Earth. It will never come to Earth unless someone like you brings it."

"Who says I have the Hutch?"

"The medical authorities here say you have. They're rarely wrong. If you let them, they can treat you here on Station One. If

you . . . why are you squinting like that? Are you having trouble with your vision? Concentric circles starting very small and growing larger and fainter and finally disappearing?"

"Yeah but—"

"That's Hutchley's Disease, all right. If you let me call the medic, they'll take care of you."

"Are you nuts, lady? You think I came here for you to call the medics? I'm riding this ferry down to Earth, so help me. If you know what's good, don't try to stop me, see?" Suddenly Stagg roared: "HEY YOU!"

It was the boy. Listening to their conversation, Sandy had edged toward the inner airlock door and had almost succeeded in locking himself in when Stagg spotted him. The giant lunged in his direction, the limp right arm swinging against his side as he ran, the blaster thrust back into his belt so that he had the use of his good left hand. With it he grabbed Sandy by the collar of his tunic and yanked him from the airlock just before the inner door hissed shut.

Effortlessly, Stagg held the boy aloft, feet kicking air. Stagg shook him and the warning was not for the boy but for his parents. "Don't try anything!" he cried. "Don't let the kid try anything. I'll kill you if I got to, I swear. I want to go down to Earth. If they come, if the

Corpsmen come, hide me. You got to hide me, see? You—"

"Put the boy down," Nancy Dugan said. She stood boldly in front of Stagg and looked up into his eyes. If you hurt him . . . " She said.

Stagg let the boy down and watched while, whimpering, he fled to his mother. From his wheelchair, Al Dugan glared with impotent hatred. The hatred was as much for himself, a helpless cripple, as it was for Stagg.

At that moment a metallic voice said: "Slip F-11! Calling slip F-11. Calling Little Maiden III. Forty-two minutes to blast-off, Little Maiden III. Are you ready?"

Dugan looked at his wife, then at Stagg. Rolling his wheelchair to the call-box, Dugan said, "We're ready."

"**A**NYTHING yet?" Furness asked Larry Harker, who was directing search operations on Ferry Spoke.

"Nothing yet, Mike. We don't have enough men to make a concentrated search. All we can do is send a man to each ferry half an hour or less before blast-off time. You figure it out. There are four-hundred and twenty-two ferries in slip right now, with one taking off every minute or so and others coming in to replace them just as fast. We have eighty Corpsmen and a

hundred ninety-six soldiers down here, so you figure it out."

"Why," Furness said, "there wouldn't even be time for a thorough search."

"Thorough search, the man says. Are you kidding? There's hardly time to poke your head inside the airlock and ask the ferry passengers if everything's jake. And that's about it. Want to try? We can use every man."

"That's what I'm here for, Larry."

"O.K. Lemme see. You can take—" Harker checked a list in front of him and put the initials MF on it—"the F series of slips. Twelve ferries in, everything from the five-hundred ton United Space Lines job to something called Little Maiden III, barely big enough to get a clearance. O.K. Here's a zero minute list on the F series. Good luck, Mike."

"Thanks!" Furness called. He didn't know if Harker heard him. For Harker was busy with another Corpsman and Furness was already running toward the F slips.

"**H**ALF an hour," Dugan said. "The Corpsmen'll come, you'll see," Sandy predicted.

"Be quiet, Sandy," Nancy said.

Dugan nodded. Every time Sandy mentioned the Corpsmen, which was often, Stagg's fear-crazed eyes went wide. Those moments, there

was no telling what the huge man might do. He was sick, no doubt about that, Dugan thought. You didn't have to be a doctor or even an ex-nurse like Nancy to know that. His eyes were not merely blood shot, they were deep red. Dugan was amazed that the big man could still see at all. And he was trembling. Apparently he could not stop trembling. It was warm in the ferry.

Even Dugan, who had been prone to chills since his crippling accident, felt warm. But Stagg was trembling violently and would probably go on trembling until Hutchley's Disease either ran its course and departed or killed him.

If only I wasn't a cripple, Dugan thought with a mixture of frustration and self-pity. He's practically out on his feet. If I wasn't a cripple I could take him. Funny, the doctors said everything was all right as far as they could tell. I should have been able to walk. But I can't move a muscle from the waist down. As if I didn't want to move one, almost. I can see it in Nancy's eyes. She has a hunch it might be like that, psychosomatic or whatever they call it. As a miner on Mars I was a flop. Earned our passage back to Earth and that's all. Now, now I don't know what. What kind of job for an examiner has-been from Mars, and a cripple That's why. That's it.

I'm not physically crippled. I just can't face reality, according to the doctors on Mars. I don't think they told Nancy. But Nancy was a nurse. Nancy knows she knows! If only she'd say something

"Attention Little Maiden III!" the intercom voice, communicating with the Ferry from the emergency Corpsman headquarters on Ferry Spoke, said. "It is now twenty-six minutes until blast-off. You will now be boarded by a Corpsman who"

The voice droned on, but Stagg yelled: "I'm going up front. I . . . I can't see so good, but I can hear. And I got this blaster. You tell the Corpsman everything's fine, see? You tell him that. I want the boy right inside, near the door, where I can see him. Me and the blaster. You just say everything's fine."

Without waiting for an answer, Stagg moved across the small cabin, half staggering, striking against the bulkheads and bolted down furniture. In a few moments he had hidden himself in the darkened front cabin of the Little Maiden III. For a while they could hear his harsh, labored breathing, but then it gradually faded until it was almost as if Gunar Stagg had ceased to exist.

At precisely that moment, there was a banging on the outer air-

lock door.

"Remember!" Stagg said in a low deadly voice. Crouched in the small dark cabin, he saw everything dimly, through a red haze, through the flashing concentric circles, through the heat in his head and the terrible cold in his body, through the numbness of his right side and his right arm. But if he concentrated every atom of his being on it, he could see. And he could hold the blaster ready.

He watched them admit the Corpsman through the airlock. He listened carefully because he couldn't see so well. The Corpsman said, "Furness is my name, folks. I guess you know what I'm looking for."

"Yes," the woman said. Stagg thought she was attractive, but it was a little hard to tell through the red haze.

"Everything ship-shape?" the Corpsman named Furness asked.

THERE was a silence. Stagg felt his fingers tighten involuntarily around the butt and trigger of the blaster. It was his left hand and the fingers still felt clumsy.

"Yes, everything is all right." Nancy Dugan said finally.

"Thank you for the trouble," the Corpsman told all of them, and smiled, and left the Little Maiden III.

I'm a failure, Al Dugan thought. What's the use of kidding myself? I'm a failure in everything I do, from mining to protecting my family even to getting well and climbing out of this wheel chair when the doctors say there's nothing wrong with me.

If he comes to Earth with us, maybe ten million people will get the Hutch and half of them will die. And if any of us isn't immune, we'll be among those ten million if this Stagg takes the long ferry trip over with us . . .

"That was easy," Stagg said, rejoining the Dugan family. "Now I guess we just wait for blast-off."

"You're going to be responsible for the deaths of five million people," Nancy Dugan said.

"I got to go down to Earth."

"You didn't even hear me. Did you? It didn't penetrate. You have only one idea in your head. You're a sick man, Mr. Stagg, and I don't merely mean Hutch's disease. You need psychiatric care."

Look who's talking, Al Dugan thought. The wife of a psychoneurotic who can't even climb out of a wheel chair although there isn't a thing wrong with him . . .

"Hey, where's the kid?" Stagg demanded suddenly.

Dugan hadn't seen his son, either. He stared quickly around the cabin and spotted him. Sandy had wedged something in the airlock

door when the Corpsman had left so that on re-opening it would not betray itself by the pneumatic hissing. He was opening the door now, slowly, an inch at a time . . .

"Come away from here!" Stagg cried, squinting desperately in the boy's direction. When the boy didn't obey him, Stagg lunged across the cabin at him. Nancy came between them and the big man clubbed her brutally from his path. Nancy whimpered and fell while Sandy went on struggling with the heavy inner door of the airlock.

He's hurt her, Dugan thought. He's going to hurt the boy too. He's going

NANCY shook her head and looked up. The big man's back-handed blow had hurt her and at first she thought her vision was playing tricks with her.

Al's wheel chair was empty.

Al was grappling with Stagg, standing in the middle of the cabin floor with him and fighting. "Oh, Al!" Nancy cried. "Al! You got out of the chair! You're not crippled, Al!"

There were tears in her eyes and all at once it became difficult to see. But she heard Al shouting. "Go on, boy! Go after that Corpsman!"

Slowly Stagg was forcing Al back across the cabin, but the smaller man clung grimly to the blaster.

Injured arm or no, Stagg was obviously the stronger of the two and the uneven fight would end soon. But if Sandy had enough time . . .

With a final effort, Stagg shook Al loose and whirled toward the airlock. But he was only in time to see the door slip fully shut.

Sandy was gone.

Cursing, half insane with frustration and fear, Stagg hurled his blaster at Al. The smaller man ducked under it and wearily launched himself at Stagg a second time. He would have to keep the giant occupied so that the Corpsman could re-enter Little Maiden III.

Which was a man-sized job for a man who hadn't even had the time to register amazement over the regained use of his paralyzed legs.

FURNESS trudged along beside the beryl-aluminum of the ferry slips. So far the hunt had been a dismal failure. With ferry after ferry blasting off, time was running out for the Corpsmen — and for five million unsuspecting Earth people who might fall victim to Hutchley's Disease unless Gunar Stagg were found and isolated properly.

Behind him, Furness heard someone calling. It was a girl's voice — no, a small boy's. "Corps-

man!" it called. "Hey, Corpsman!"

Furness turned and trotted toward the boy, who was breathless and disheveled. "What is it, son?"

"Little Maidden III . . . Mom and pop . . . Stagg . . ."

"Stagg! But I was just —"

" . . . hiding. Come on, mister!"

Together, they sprinted back toward F-11. Furness reached the ferry a dozen strides ahead of the boy and hit the outer door of the airlock with his shoulder. He had expected it to be locked; a sudden jolt sometimes unsprings an airlock door unless it is vac-sealed in space. But Furness received a surprise — the door was not locked at all.

Furness plunged on through into the cabin.

Stagg had the man who Furness had seen before in a wheel chair down on the floor. Stagg was strangling him. The woman stood there, helpless, mute with fear. She held Stagg's blaster in her hand and was pointing it at his back and pulling the trigger, but apparently the chamber was empty.

Furness leaped down upon the the giant and dragged him off Al Dugan.

Bellowing, Stagg swung up and over to meet his new adversary. His right arm still hung slack, but he had learned how to use it like a club, swinging it with his left hand

as if it did not belong to his body at all. He swung it and hit Furness in the stomach with it and the Corpsman staggered back away from him.

Stagg was up and after Furness at once, chopping short angry jabs to his face and body with his good left hand. Furness took them, husbanding his strength while he waited for the breath to return to his air-starved lungs. As he grew more confident, Stagg's jabs became, hooks. A one-handed man and a man who'd been hit in the solar plexus and couldn't get any air into his lungs' —

Suddenly Furness moved inside the wide left hooks and countered for the first time with his own right hand. He felt the skin of his knuckles split and felt his right arm go numb to the elbow, but Stagg almost lost his footing.

Furness came after him relentlessly now. Maybe some day Stagg would realize it. Furness hit him with three lefts. For Stagg's own good, because otherwise he would have had to kill him. Furness crossed his right hand to the now unprotected jaw, once and once again. Stagg almost fell but pivoted his body around and brought the club of his numb right arm around with it, taking Furness from chest to groin with the whole length of the hard right arm.

Dazed, unexpectedly hurt, Fur-

ness went down. Stagg was on him at once, butting with his head, snarling, a wild giant of a man now. Wheezing, gasping for breath, Furness brought up his legs and kicked up. Stagg took the weight of the Corpsman's thrust in his midsection and went up and over Furness' head, crashing against the bulkhead.

When he got up, dazed and blinking, Furness was there waiting. Furness hit him. Stagg just stood there, so Furness hit him again. He lost count of the blows and began to wonder in a world of numb fatigue, if it would be possible to fell the bigger man.

"This station hospital is a regu-

And then, without any warning at all, Stagg did come crashing down.

"You . . . better . . . call . . . the medics!" Furness said. His lips were bloody and swollen and it was difficult to talk. Someone — he figured it was the woman — helped him to a chair. He sat and heard the delightful crackling of the intercom radio as Medical Spoke was called.

"HOW are you feeling now?" Amos Burt asked.

"This station hospital is a regular vacation resort," Furness said, grinning. "I knew all along I was a gold-bricker deepdown inside."

"You'll be all right in a week or

so," Burt said seriously. "Two cracked ribs are what's keeping you down."

"How's Stagg?"

"You could have killed him, the Dugans said. But you didn't. You wanted to do it your way after all. Didn't you?"

"I guess so, chief. He was sick. He was delirious. Maybe a little crazy with too much Venus."

"The medics think he'll pull through Hutch, Mike. After that, he'll probably need psychiatric care. Are you glad he'll live?"

"Sure I'm glad."

"Guys like you."

"What's wrong with guys like me?"

"Nothing, I guess. Maybe the Corps needs both kinds."

"You think I'm soft?"

"After the way you handled Stagg? Hell, no. But you're the kind of man who's willing to give quarter when no quarter should be given. You were lucky."

"Will Higgins be all right?"

"The sergeant was lucky."

"And Al Dugan, who can walk again?"

"Lucky," Burt said. "All of you were lucky." But suddenly he grinned at the younger man. "That's what you're trying to say, isn't it? That man needs luck — a lot of luck — to conquer space?"

"Yeah," Furness said, as, somewhere nearby, a ferry blasted off.



Feedback



INVERSE feedback is a technical expression which, though originally taken from radio engineering, now can be applied to half the miraculous developments in modern science.

It is the essence of "Automation." With all the talk about automation, automatic factories, very few understand precisely what makes these things possible. The answer is of course, "inverse feedback."

Truly automated machines, be they gun-directors for anti-aircraft rocket batteries, automatic milling machines, or the latest in business accounting machines, employ inverse feedback.

Inverse feedback refers to the ability of the machine to measure the amount by which it has failed to complete a direction, and the ability of the machine to minimize that failure. Or, in other words, the machine measures the difference between its input signal and its response to that signal and acts to make that difference zero!

What is most fascinating about the concept is that now it is generally recognized that the "mechanisms" of the human body—of Nature for that matter—employ inverse feedback! So what at first glance appears new is as old as Time itself.



"I'll let our guest walk up and down before our panel and give them one free guess as to what Mr. Globtyx's job is."

LIKE A SILVER ARROW

by

Ivar Jorgensen

**Tommy was the luckiest young man on Earth
for he had been chosen as the first to leave it;
yet, what about the loved ones he left behind . . .**

SHE was afraid faintness would engulf her if she went to meet Tommy at the door. So she left it open and waited in the old parlor rocker, hands tightly clasped, ears finely attuned for the sound of his first footstep.

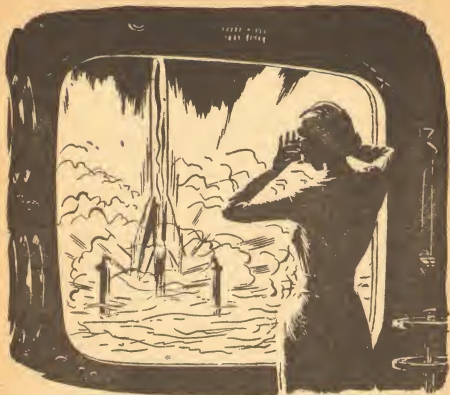
An officer had come earlier in an important looking maroon automobile to tell her she could see her son from four o'clock that afternoon until nine the next morning. The officer had also brought a memo on official blue paper listing exactly what Tommy must eat and the exact moment he had to be in bed. He asked if the right foods were in the house, saying if not, they would be supplied. Then he had congratulated her upon being Tommy's mother and she'd tried to remember his exact words in order to repeat them to Tommy. They were such fine words and they would have made any mother

proud. But she did a bad job of the remembering.

And now Tommy was here! He burst into the parlor, yelling, "Mom!" He snatched her up in his arms and kissed her; exactly like a son; not at all like a mere valuable property the Army kept securely locked in its deepest vault—the way she had once visualized him in a nightmare. He put her down and she held him close and whispered, "Tommy; Tommy darling! Was it—terrible?"

He laughed and put her on the lounge and sat close beside her, touching the tip of her nose with his. "Rough! Tell you what happened—they had all us guys in a room with the door locked. Then they said, 'All right, you slobs! Crawl through the keyhole! The one who makes it is in like Flynn.'"

She cupped a possessive hand under his chin and looked deep into



his clear eyes, trying to draw into herself some little part she could secretly keep; a tiny bit the Army wouldn't know about. As she did so, his boyishness fell away and he was suddenly a man with an awed, wondering face and almost a reverence in his voice as he said, "There were twenty-eight hundred left after the first screening. Eight weeks later, there were nine. And now—nobody but Tom Wells. Me!

All alone, Mother. I'm—it!"

For one disgraceful moment, she wished he'd been born with bad eyes—a withered arm—whatever it would have taken to eliminate him. Then she was ashamed and tried to hide herself in his pride and happiness. Certainly there was enough for both of them. She said, "Do you think you ought to rest a while, dear?"

He was a boy again and his

laugh boomed. "Lord, no! What's to eat? I'm starved."

"I have their list here."

"Oh, no! Can't they loosen up for one night?" He shrugged and laughed again and pinched her cheek. "All right, you non-commisioned slave driver. See if you can find a glass of orange juice on the list . . ."

THE evening that followed had been so long anticipated that she felt a touch of panic when she realized it was not going well—or at least, not as she had dreamed of it, a cluster of hours as warm and intimate as an armful of apple blossoms. But perhaps a dream asks too much, she thought. She and Tommy *were* close and warm and intimate. Something was missing, though, and soon she knew what it was and made a special effort to set it in her mind so as to tell William later. She would tell him that Tommy had entered a strange new world into which she could not follow, and though they sat together at a small, candle-lit table, they spoke to each other through a crystal wall.

"—so it's a three-stage. They finally decided that was best. The gyro-pilot won't synchronize completely—lock in with the robot calculator that is—until two rocket frames have been discarded. Then

the gyro—"

And she was answering him: —*the very first swing you ever had and I thought it was too high but William said no so I put you into it and you fell right out again and skinned your knee. William looked at it and then he laughed and said, "You can't fly to the stars all in one hop, youngster."*

But she realized Tommy could not hear because he had left her world; like a dazzling young butterfly bursting its silken shell. So she folded her dream and put it carefully away and listened dutifully, but all she got from his telling was that which she already knew; that no lunar landing was planned; only a flight around the moon and back. She conceived it as an endless belt, crossed in the middle turning two huge wheels; a cosmic loop transferring power from Earth to Luna; that was how the chart had seemed to picture it.

Finally, there was coffee in the living room and two experts discussing project M on television for the enlightenment of the public. One of the experts was rather pompous, and described Tommy as a perfect specimen of *Homo Sapiens*. Tommy laughed but somehow, the words chilled her. Then the clock in the hall struck nine, relentlessly calling attention to bedtime. Her nerves were tight

and she arose quickly at the sound. Tommy got up and took her hands and said, "Gosh, Mom, you're jumpy as a cat. You'd think I was going to the moon or something!" She realized this was his joke and laughed with him.

After he was asleep, she went into his room and sat looking down at him, framed as he was, in a shaft of moonglow, but she was afraid he would awaken and she did not want to disturb his sleep, so she went back to her own room and waited out the night, passing the time by going over the things she would tell William.

They came for him precisely at nine, not in the maroon car, but in a shining limousine, because the trip to the blasting pits would be in the newsreels along with the blastoff. She sat between Tommy and—to quote his whispered introduction—"a piece of high Army brass" whom she would remember as a middle aged, kindly-faced man with a lot of gray in his hair. She held Tommy's hand under the coat folded in her lap, but he drew it away as he turned to acknowledge farewells waved from the curb by the neighbors—the people he had known and grown up with—and after they had all vanished around the corner, he forgot to put his hand back.

At the field, a temporary plat-

form had been built beside the rocket—the needle-nosed monster that Tommy would ride into outer space. Things were handled with the efficient confusion usually dominant on such momentous occasions. They snatched Tommy away immediately on arrival and she was put in the charge of a very pretty young WAC who appeared to know her business. They conversed, but she would never remember what was said. She felt she was conducting herself satisfactorily, though—not disgracing Tommy—because she heard someone whisper: "That's his mother—the tall, handsome woman. Surprising how casually she takes all this." And there had been a reply: "Some of them raise their kids with an eye on glory."

She was led to a seat on the platform, but she did not feel self-conscious because it was quite crowded. Important people made speeches. She had never cared for speeches until now. These, she hoped would go on and on, even while knowing the futility of such a wish; as though the earth and moon and stars awaited the pleasure of publicity conscious officials! The blastoff had been set to coincide with eternal cosmic movement—timed to the microsecond, and would occur on schedule. But so soon, now; so very soon.

SHE was allowed a moment for farewell. They led her to a room and the door opened and Tommy entered. And she would remember that it was she herself who marred the precious time. She had been holding hard for so long that it was becoming difficult, so she had to concentrate upon throttling her own emotions—keeping him from being ashamed of her—sending him off casually into the black night of space. It was over so quickly. The door closed and seemed instantly to open again. Tommy whispered, "I love you, Mom. See you in x hours." Then he was gone and the WAC was again by her side, saying she was very sorry, they'd planned to give her more time. The governor had talked too long. That, with the rigid schedule—. She was so sorry.

The blastoff occurred eleven and a half minutes later. She watched it through a large window over a row of artificial flowers in a trough along the sill. Their color was blotted out by the blaze of blinding light and fury that was Tommy's wave of farewell. There was a terrible roaring in her ears. Tommy—one lone boy—against the universe.

It would be a certain number of hours—they told her approximately—the exact figure being some

sort of silly secret, and drove her home, asking if she wanted anyone to wait with her. But she wanted to be alone.

And then there was nothing but a black void filled with her prayers until the gray-haired officer came back and told her as gently as he could that Tommy was not coming back.

After that, another long, dark void . . .

She arrived at Mount Hope around ten o'clock on the morning of the second day and walked down the familiar shaded path until she came to the neatly clipped green mound. She snipped several dead leaves off the nasturtium plants at its foot and then sat down as usual on the stone bench beside William . . .

. . . it was something about the gyro pilot failing to synchronize. The rocket did not make the lunar turn sharply enough. He's out there—going—going—

He did what he had to do.

I'm afraid that doesn't help me much, William. Many sons do what they have to do and are not sentenced to drift forever in outer space.

I'm afraid there is little I can say that will help you. Perhaps your refuge is your pride. A refuge for us both. We met and loved and our seed was flung into the

infinite. No other two from time's dawn can claim as much.

I don't know—

Or pride in him. They had to have a silver arrow. They searched everywhere and Tommy was the only one—the only silver arrow they could find.

William—I think, under the gayety, he realized he would never come back—sensed it—

Then you must fill your emptiness with his strength—the heritage he left you. There is a wisdom and a courage in the very young; a mystic sense of destiny that fades in later years. How else could they fight and die in wars devised by the very old? How

could they crawl in the mud if they were not guided by the stars.

Still she was not sure . . .

I'm afraid there is little more. I can give you, except that you will have him with you everywhere. Perhaps you will find comfort in knowing that for him there will never be a grave; not earthbound; not starbound; wherever you go, he will be there with you, laughing when you falter—lifting you up . . .

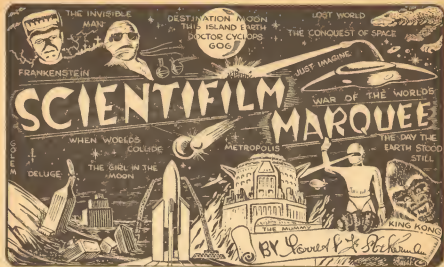
Yes, it would be enough—more than enough.

Tommy's strength.

As she walked up the shaded path, there was a quiet smile on her face.



"Rather hilly around here, isn't it?"



OF IMAGINATIVE TALES on the silver screen there'll be no dearth to be seen in this New Year of 1956. Watch out for a mirthquake if the interested parties are successful in capturing that captivating Anglicomedian Alec Guinness for the potent part of the last potential Father of his country (in fact the whole world) in the Pat Frank howler about the Back-to-Adam Bomb, MR. ADAM. Failing funnyman Guinness, Jack Lemmon (of "Mr. Roberts" acclaim) has been mentioned for the role.

And the producers hope to roll us in the aisles with *The Floaters*, a yarn treating levitation with a certain lack of gravity. It's a pseudo-science farce about a mystery metal that defies Newton's law about the apple.

Project Magellan. The Black Planet. Perhaps you read it in ab-

breviated form as the Collier's magazine serial, or later as the expanded pocketbook (also hardcoverd) put out by Ballantine. DARK DOMINION by David Duncan, the conquest of space-station novel. It leads the rest in sounding like it'll be the solidest and best of the two dozen eye-in-the-sky yarns announced for filming, including "Satellite Operation", "Man Made Moon", "Space Station—U. S. A.", and "This Island" (a British entry).

Flame Girls of Space is being produced in England. Sounds like we'll be lucky if it's never shown Stateside—or at least confined to the telechannels. But England has completed a very fine scientifilm, my colleague John Carnell of London tells me, in *TIMESLIP* by Charles Eric Maine. (Maine, incidentally, is one of the science-fictioners like Harry Harrison, Arthur Gibson and myself, capable of un-

derstanding the "foreign" dialog in the currently showing Joseph Cotten-Eva Bartok film, *Special Delivery*, in which the artificial universal language Esperanto, sometimes called "the tongue of Tomorrow", is spoken.) A film with a nuclear physics background, *TIME-SLIP* is an imaginative mystery focussing on the puzzle of a man whose brain functions seven and a half seconds in the future. Carnell calls the picture "a first-rate production of the type of story that will be readily acceptable to most cinema audiences who will absorb without query the brief science fiction elements without realizing the fact." Also due from England, *SHOCK!* starring Brian Donlevy as an experimental rocket pilot whose venture into space alters his body chemistry in a queer and menacing manner.

On the Threshold of Space, 20th Fox's semi-documentary space-medicine "A" movie, will be the last screen appearance of the late star John Hodiak, who died of a heart attack with his role all but completed. Somewhat similar in type will be Warner Bros' *Toward the Unknown*.

Warners had a sneak preview late in October of its spectacular *ANIMAL WORLD*. One of my Hollywood clients, author Ed M. Clinton, Jr., caught it and characterized it to me as "of considerable interest to stfans by virtue of Ray Harryhausen's magnificent paleontological models. "These creations," says Clinton, "are the picture's real stars, and worth the price of admission." Reviewing the picture before Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society, Clinton described:

"The great land lizards of the Mesozoic are made to epitomize the prehistoric life-forms of Earth somewhat along the lines of *Rite of Spring* sequence from *FANTASIA*. The brontosaurus breath, the tyrannosaurs, stegosaurus, pterodactyls, et al, eat, fight, even (if somewhat grotesquely) lay eggs. In a climactic sequence hordes of dinosaurs, amidst terrific din, die in a volcanic eruption."

The other side of the Moon, a la Disney, will be revealed in the technicolor telefilm sequel to *MAN IN SPACE*.

A natural for a double bill should be Frank Quattrocchi's original screenplay *GIGANTOSO* (about a radioactive island of mutated giant animal life, including an Amazonian giantress) and *THE SHRINKING MAN* by Richard Matheson. A fine five figure sum has been reported for Dick to transmute his own as yet unpublished Gold Medal novel into screen form for Universal Studios.

Charles Schneer, who feels he's found a successful formula in *It Came from Beneath the Sea* and *Attack of the Flying Saucers*—two special effects spectacles utilizing the talents of Academy Award winner Ray Harryhausen—is searching anthologies and other sources for similar vehicles. Among the properties which have been called to his attention are *RENAISSANCE* by Raymond "Island Earth" Jones, "The Earth-Watchers" by G. Gordon Dewey & Simon Matrii, "Fishermen from Space" (an original treatment) by Kris Neville & Wm. R. Cox, and "*Dhactwhu!*—Remember?" by Ro-

bert W. Lowndes and your scientific scribe.

Curt (Donovan's Brain) Siodmak has scripted *Cyclops, the One-Eyed Monster*, in which James Craig will play the lead role . . . Bela Lugosi will make his first color appearance in *The Ghoul Goes West*, to be filmed in VistaVision . . . *The Phantom of the Opera*, which has served as a vehicle for Lon Chaney and Claude Rains, may be made for the third time with Mario Lanza!

"A Trip to Mars" and "Our Friend the Atom", two Disney projects, will get assists from Dr. Heinz Haber, internationally known physicist, as special science consultant . . . Geoffrey Homes has scripted "Fall-Out", hydrogen bomb drama for Allied Artists, makers of *World Without End* . . . In France, Rene Barjavel, well-known s. f. author, will adapt his compatriot Jules Verne's *FROM EARTH TO THE MOON* for the international screen . . . Guy Madison will be seen in *Windblast*, described as a picture about "a pilot who flies that-away thru space."

Corinthia Productions is scheduled to debut with *Sword in the Sky*, hair-raiser about a maverick missile which runs wild about 1000 miles up and constitutes a globe-threatening bomb-menace . . . Paul Blaisdell's work would appear to be cut out for him, with *It Stalks by Night* and *The Fiend from Outer Space* announced for co-billing production by James Nicholson, President of American Releasing Corp.

The video show *Space Patrol* is skedded for a version for theatrical release . . . Edward G. Robin-

son's son will get into the act with "Space Ship" . . . Producer Roger (Day World Ended) Corman has put "Fortress Beneath the Sea" on his future production chart . . . And Bryan Foy will bring forth a 1950 version of *THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND*.

Calling All Angels: Wyott Ordung seeking backer(s) for his ready-to-roll script, *Hell in the Heavens*; and Edward Halspiegel has a spectacular scenario, all costs estimated, coscripted with ace sci-fi author Poul Anderson. This column may be contacted for an introduction to either.

First TARZAN film in color and wide-screen will be "Tarzan and the Lost Safari" with Gordon Scott as the new apeman . . . Corinne Calvet may star in an untitled scientific film to be lensed in Germany by CineAfrica Productions . . . The story of the first woman to go to Mars will be delineated in the as yet uncast *Volunteer* . . . No less a star than Anne Baxter is announced as the feminine lead for *LAST DAY ON EARTH*.

Last Minute Flash: The title of *THE BODY SNATCHERS* has been changed to *THEY CAME FROM ANOTHER WORLD*, and internal changes may have been made, I hear, since I reported enthusiastically to you on the sneak preview last summer. It could have stood a little improvement, but if they have ruined it in any way (watered down that wonderful downbeat ending, for instance) I am going to do some body snatching of my own!

—Forrest J. Ackerman



Nike Defense



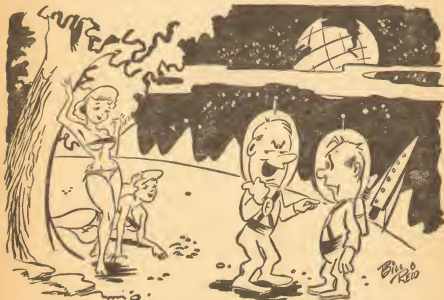
Within two years, every major American city will be surrounded by a fence which could only have come from science-fiction. Rocket batteries of slim, trim "Nikes"—twenty foot rockets armed with plane-sensing instruments and sure death for bombers—will guard the skies.

The Government is not being particularly secretive about the abilities of the Nike, because once launched it cannot be stopped by any known agencies. With terrifying certainty its electronic senses will guide it to its target, presumably an H-bomb carrying aircraft.

But so great is the speed of the Nike that contact will occur twenty or thirty miles from the city proper, causing the invading plane to waste its lethal atomic energy on empty space.

Perhaps more striking than the Nike rocket itself is the incredible manifold of electronic and radar gear associated with it. The Nike is launched and aimed along invisible radar paths and this takes equipment. Its own sensors do not act until close target location is assured.

Nike is not perfect—but its successors will be!



"You stay here. I'll go ahead and see what these savages want."

No Place For An Earthman

by

C. H. Thames

Spooner met Wilma when the riots started on Lagon. She wanted to leave, he wanted to stay and take his chances. Either way they faced death!

HE was not the last earthman on Lagon III but he was the last earthman in Intercity after the extra-Lagonian riots started. The riots were worst in Intercity, of course. Everything that was bad became worse in Intercity, an interstellar hell-hole and last port of call for the ne'er-do-wells and failure of a score of worlds.

The riots did not particularly disturb him. The pattern of his life had been spun upon a web of violence. He was no stranger to it and could accomodate his own behavior to it. He was unemployed and would remain unemployed at least until order was restored in Intercity. At the moment, the natives would hire no extra-Lagonians — which, he thought, was an understatement. The natives were prone to mob any extra-Lagonian on sight, provided he was helpless

and alone.

It had started two weeks before, when a virulent form of Sirian marsh fever had been brought to Lagon III, probably by a Sirian spacehand on an Ophiuchus-bound liner. The fever had swept Lagon III claiming five million victims the first two weeks. All extra-Lagonians except Sirians were immune and in the simple minds of the Lagonians, this made them somehow culpable. Guiltiest of all were the men of Earth, who had invented the interstellar drive which made contact between the worlds possible.

He thought of this now as he trudged through the cold and thin snow in Intercity. He had no regrets. He had fashioned his own life, often hoboing from world to world because there was so much to see and so few years in just one mortal lifetime. If it brought him



here to Intercity now, with no one to wonder what had happened to him — so what?

The Lagonian cape he wore hid the fact that he was an Earthman, although he had to crouch over to mask his height and hoped no one would notice the width of his shoulders. The cape was an old one which he had picked up second hand here in Intercity, and it did not keep out the cold early evening winds and snow as Lagon III's twin suns set in the northern sky.

His name was Elston Spooner and the Lagonian police were looking for him because, two hours before as he lined up with several hundred down-and-out natives on a soup-kitchen line, he had been spotted as an extra-Lagonian. Far off through the snow now he could hear the wailing howls of the xanders, hound-like Lagonian animals which the police were using to pick up his trail. He shrugged. He would keep in hiding in the back streets and alleyways of Intercity if he could, but the police and their xanders might be better than a mob of aroused natives.

Suddenly ahead of him there was a bright, cheerful square of yellow light in the cold, gathering, engulfing darkness. Music drifted to him and the shouts and laughter of men and women. The few huddled Lagonians who hurried by

paid no attention to the revelry near at hand. They were small for humanoids, their men no bigger than earthwomen. Their cultural development, Spooner knew, was on par with Earth's Western Europe's Middle Ages.

The bright square resolved itself through the snow into a frosted-over window. The music and laughter came from the warm, unseen world on the other side of it. Spooner thought that if the few native Lagonians who passed gave the place a wide berth, it probably catered to extra-Lagonians. Anyhow, it seemed logical enough and he was so cold and so hungry that he knew he would chance it.

When he opened the heavy wood-plank door the sounds of revelry increased as if someone had turned up the volume of a radio. A blast of warm air enveloped Spooner and he was abruptly aware of the loud noise of the wind whistling through the narrow alleyways behind him.

"Close that door, you idiot!" someone shouted in spatial lingua franca, and Spooner slammed the door, removing his cloak with a flourish because he had decided not to slink around the bar until someone discovered his identity as an earthman. Boldness, he knew, often had its advantages.

"An earthman, by Plotis!" a

purple-skinned, thin-lipped denizen of Fomalhaut IV cried.

"Yeah," Spooner said mildly, "I'm an earthman. So what?" He walked boldly across the crowded floor to the Fomalhautian and stared him down from a distance of half a foot. The burly Fomalhautian's purple face lost a shade or two of color.

"Nothing friend. Nothing at all," the Fomalhautian said. "I just didn't expect another earthman here, that's all."

"Another? I thought there wouldn't be another earthman in Intercity by now."

"There's another, all right," said the Fomalhautian, jerking a thumb toward a table in the rear of the small, crowded room. "Take a gander."

Spooner did so, and smiled grimly. He was still a solitary statistic. For the second earthling in Intercity was a woman.

HE went over to her table and said, "My name is Elston Spooner. Kind of alone, aren't you?"

She looked up sharply, but her features softened when she saw he was an earthman. Spooner had to fight an impulse to stare. The earthgirl was beautiful. She was dressed expensively but tastefully in furs which would have look-

ed good back in New Kansas City or any of the other Earth capitals. She was a tall blonde girl with severely straight blonde hair worn longer than was the fashion on Earth or the outworlds. She had a broad forehead and wide-spaced gray eyes which were now frankly giving Spooner the once-over. Her lips were vividly red, parted slightly over gleaming teeth. What Spooner could see of her figure under the furs was a lithely-curved confirmation of the fact that earthwomen were regarded across the galaxy as paragons of beauty.

"You scared me," she said to Spooner.

"Lady, you should have been scared long before I got here."

"You mean the riots?"

"That's exactly what I mean. Can I sit down?"

"I don't see why."

Spooner did a double-take and remained standing. "Dont tell me you're down on earthmen too?"

"I don't know you, that's all. Why should I trust an earthman any more than other people in this fantastic city?"

Spooner grinned. "Ordinarily, you'd have a point there. But don't you think there comes a time when earthfolk ought to stick together?"

"All right," the blonde girl said after a while. "You might as well sit down." But understand this: that's not an invitation for anything else."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, damn you and damn all of them, I know I'm pretty. I know if I try to get up and leave this place I'll be followed and either propositioned or just plain attacked. By a Fomalhuation or an Altairian or even by you, Mr. Spooner."

"If that's the way you feel, what are you doing here?" Spooner asked as he sat down.

"It's a long story, Spooner. You wouldn't be interested. Let's just say I was a sucker in the oldest interstellar con-game in the business."

"The job on a distant world routine?" Spooner guessed.

"I hate to admit it, but yes."

Spooner looked at the expensive furs she wore. "You don't look like you'd have come half-way across the galaxy on a wild goose chase for a job that didn't exist."

"Don't I?" the blonde girl asked, smiling. "If you mean this wardrobe, forget it. Wilma Fuller's life savings were transformed into furs."

"That's you, Wilma Fuller?"

"Yes. It was a modeling job

here on Lagon 111. There was no job of course, unless you can call the slave trade a job. I just did manage to get away. So now you know the brief sad history of Wilma Fuller. Say, do you want a drink?"

"I could use one. I'm broke."

Wilma's eyebrows lifted at that, but then she shrugged. "I'm not. I have a little left. It isn't very much, but—"

As if he had overheard their conversation, the fat ashen-skinned Antarean barman hovered at Spooner's elbow and purred in badly-spoken lingua-franca, "Get-cha anything?"

"Earth whiskey if you've got it," Spooner said, then added, turning to Wilma, "if it's your treat."

"Of course." And, when the barman wandered off: "Spooner, have you any plans for the immediate future?"

"To stay alive, I guess. That may be hard enough all by itself in Intercity during the riots."

"Listen to me," Wilma whispered. "I have five hundred earth credits and a space liner ticket to Earth via Sirius and Procyon in my possession. I'd like to use the ticket while I'm still in one piece, but I'd never make it to the spaceport, not all the way across Intercity at a time like this, not

alone. The five hundred credits are yours if you get me to the spaceport in one piece and in time to catch the liner. What do you say?"

THE barman brought Spooner's drink and a refill for Wilma Fuller. They waited until he had waddled off again, then Spooner said, "I say I'm hungry."

"I'm sorry. I should have realized, you being broke and all." She waved a hand in air and soon the barman returned and took their orders for food. The nearest thing to Earth cooking they could get was Centaurian apergot stew and they settled for that. Spooner was so hungry he would have settled for raw elephant steak.

"When does the liner leave?" Spooner asked while they were waiting for the apergot stew.

"In the morning."

"You mean, tomorrow morning?"

"Yes. It's the last liner out of Lagon for almost a month. I don't think an earthgirl alone would last that long. Do you?"

Spooner shook his head slowly. "No. I guess I don't."

"Will you help me? You could buy yourself a ticket off Lagon with the five hundred credits."

"If I wanted to."

"You're joking. Why in the world wouldn't you want to?"

Instead of answering Spooner said, "Here comes the waiter."

They ate their savory apergot stew in silence. Spooner thought: if I wanted to. But he wasn't sure he did, not yet. You started drifting, he thought. You didn't mean to go on drifting all your life, but first thing you knew, the drifting had separated you from the people who had formed your circle and you were alone, far away among strangers. For the interstellar drifters, it had been and always would be dog-eat-dog.

Leave Lagon III now? But the riots were just beginning. Sure it was dangerous. It might prove fatal. But if it didn't, and if the riots got worse, there was for Spooner the prospect of a big killing in loot, in fortunes forgotten or fortunes lost by frightened little outworlders rushing, pushing, stepping over one another to leave Lagon III

"You haven't answered my question, Spooner."

"I was just thinking."

"How's the stew?"

"Pretty good, after Lagonion hardtack, if as bad when." If drifting ever paid, Spooner was thinking, it paid during a riot or a season of rioting—provided you

could stay alive. But he did not tell that to Wilma Fuller.

"You'll help me—for five hundred credits?"

It was the wrong kind of danger. A man waiting for the opportunity to pick up loot, possibly with great danger, didn't walk into danger in the process of ferrying a pretty earthgirl to the Lagonian spaceport on the other side of Intercity. It was the wrong kind of danger and five hundred credits did not mitigate that fact.

"Well, you see—" Spooner began.

Just then two men, lumbered across the crowded floor toward them. The one on the left, the enormous perspiring fat man with the hard, scale-like skin, Spooner saw, was a native of Epsilon Aurigae VI. He seemed very drunk and he didn't try to hide it. His companion was a small, scarecrow-thin native of Lagon III itself, a grim, ugly little humanoid with a startling green shock of hair in vivid contrast to his purple skin.

"I told you they were earthpeople," the fat man said, bending down close to Wilma and leering at her.

"Better shove off, friend," Spooner suggested.

"They have their nerve," the Lagonian said. "Coming here."

WILMA touched Spooner's hand. "Let's get out of here. Please. If they make an ugly scene there's liable to be a riot."

"That's about all the earthmen have," the fat Aurigaeon proclaimed. "Beautiful women." He placed a heavy scale-skinned hand on Wilma's shoulder. He rocked unsteadily on his huge flat feet and leered at her. He was so drunk he had difficulty in standing upright.

"Get your hands off her before I break them off," Spooner said quietly.

The fat Aurigaeon removed his hand but said nothing. The little Lagonian said, "I heard that. It was a threat. You earthmen are always threatening, always making trouble. If it isn't one thing it's another. Bringing sickness to us with interstellar drive and interstellar trade—"

The barman was again hovering nearby. "I don't want any trouble," he pleaded. This place is open to everybody who can pay, and that includes outworlders and earthmen too."

"Where, my friend," the Aurigaeon wheezed, "have you been all this time? Don't you know that martial law has been declared because the earthmen are robbing and pillaging—"

"That's a lie," Spooner said.

"The Lagonians are the ones rioting—right here in the interstellar quarter of their city."

"You heard him," the fat Aurigaeon shouted, a look of dismay crossing his gross features. "He called me a liar."

"Don't look for trouble," Spooner advised him. "And definitely don't start anything you're in no condition to finish."

"Don't tell me what to do!" the fat man roared, and swung a meaty fist clumsily at Spooner. The earthman stood up and parried the blow with little difficulty but the Aurigaeon staggered awkwardly to one side with the momentum of his own follow-through and crashed into the table, up-ending it.

Wilma screamed and fell over backwards as the table collapsed under the fat Aurigaeon's weight.

"I'll send for the militia," the barman cried.

A crowd of outworlders quickly gathered and while they were not sympathetic toward the Aurigaeon or his Lagonian companion, they lost no love on Spooner or Wilma either. For while they didn't relish the idea of riots directed toward outworlders in general, they were quite willing to center the blame for all their trouble on earthmen, thereby relieving themselves of any possi-

ble guilt.

"Throw the earthman out of here!" a shrill-voiced Arcturian albino cried.

"They make nothing but trouble wherever they go," the Lagonian scarecrow chimed in.

The Aurigaeon stood up unsteadily and threw himself bodily at Spooner. The earthman, his already frayed temper at the breaking point, met the clumsy charge halfway and sat his bigger adversary down with a lightning left hook to the blubbery jaw. Then Spooner whirled and barely had time to duck as someone two tables away hurled a drinking mug at him. There was the sound of glass shattering and more shouts as Spooner grabbed Wilma's hand and leaped with her toward the door.

"Look out!" she screamed.

IT was the scarecrow Lagonian, suddenly barring their way. A knife flashed silver in his hand and his eyes gleamed with irrational, fanatic hatred. His mouth hung slack and spittle formed on his lower lip but he held the knife too high, over his right shoulder, and too tight, the purple knuckles strained almost white. He was not a knife-fighter, Spooner thought in the split second of time left before action became imperative. A

knife fighter would hold the handle of the weapon loosely. And a knife fighter would hold it down low, below his waist, on a half-opened palm. That way, it would be very difficult to ward off.

All at once the Lagonian lunged not at Spooner but at Wilma. Spooner cursed and threw himself between them. He felt the knife rip through the fabric of his Lagonian cloak and bite into the muscle of his left upper arm. Without pausing in stride he swung the edge of his open right hand in a wide blurring arc at the Lagonian's frail-boned face. It hit with sledge-hammer force and the Lagonian screamed once in surprise and pain and then fell, unconscious and with a probable broken jaw, at Spooner's feet.

Something struck Spooner's head just above the right ear and immediately afterwards there was the sound of glass shattering. The blow staggered him, but he continued toward the door, somehow finding Wilma's hand and holding it as he ran.

Spooner pushed and the heavy door swung outward with a creaking groan of ancient wooden hinges. An icy blast of wind raced down the dark alleyway and swept them along as they plunged outside. Briefly behind them there

was the sound of half-hearted pursuit, but it soon faded into the wind and the night.

Still they ran ahead for several moments before they dared stop. Three times Spooner plunged with the breathless girl up a new twisting path and three times she nearly stumbled on his heels as he all but dragged her along. The night had closed in on them almost at once, but it would be a very short night because the smaller of Lagon 111's two suns made the complete circuit in something less than sixteen hours. At this latitude and season it meant they had six hours or less of darkness. Six hours until dawn—and blastoff of the last liner leaving Lagon in almost a month.

"You'll take me?" Wilma panted when they stopped running and leaned against a stone wall, protected for the moment against the wind.

Spooner nodded without speaking, then realized the gesture would be all but lost in the darkness and said, "Yeah, I guess so."

"Thank you, Spooner. Thank—what was that? Did you hear something?"

"I did," Spooner said. It was a weird low howling sound, deeper than the wind. "Xanders," he said. "They're looking for me."

Wilma smiled in the darkness.

He could barely make out the whiteness of her teeth. "They're looking for me," she said. "With xanders. Oh Spooner, Spooner what will we do?"

Spooner prowled back and forth before the stone wall. The xanders. Oh Spooner, Spooner than he had thought. If the militia stopped to think about it, they would realize that Spooner and the girl would head for Lagon's spaceport, especially since an outbound starship was leaving at dawn. So, the militia could intercept them at a dozen points along the way . . .

"What are you thinking about, Spooner?"

"Nothing, Forget it."

"I'm cold. It's very cold out. These furs are for show—they don't do much good against a stiff wind, I'm afraid."

Closer this time, the xanders howled again. It was difficult to determine the sound's direction. Spooner might barge up an alleyway with Wilma Fuller and meet their pursuers head-on. But, he decided, that would be better than waiting here for them without trying to get away.

In the darkness he found Wilma's hand and grasped it firmly. "Come on," he said. "And whatever you do, keep hold of me. We don't want to get separated."

THEY walked in silence for a time, the sound of Spooner's boots against the cobbles all but obliterated by the moaning wind. Wilma asked, "Do you think we're going in the right direction?"

"Sure," Spooner said promptly, but did not feel so confident. Intercity was an intricate maze, a labyrinth, a slum city built section by section, with no plan and no pattern. Even in daylight the going was difficult for an outworlder. At night you could only hope, especially when the stars were obscured.

Ahead of them suddenly in the darkness a man screamed. It was an unexpected sound and not a scream of fright or terror but a scream of pain. It made the vestigial hackles rise on the back of Spooner's neck.

The scream was followed by a man's savage oath and a woman's high, frightened, hysterical laughter. "Hurry up," a voice said. "Somebody may have heard —"

Spooner's first thought was to wait until whatever was going to happen there up ahead happened. But then he realized that the unknown victim's scream and the stealth of his attackers might mean a weapon — and if the weapon were anything more than a knife, Spooner and Wilma could use it. He put his hand on Wilma's arm

and then leaned close to her until his lips touched her ear in the darkness. At first she recoiled from him but he whispered. "Stay here. I'm going up ahead. Wait until I call you. All right?"

For answer, she squeezed his hand and whispered, the words barely audible but somehow more meaningful than if she had shouted, "Be careful, Spooner."

He moved quickly forward through the thin snow on the balls of his feet. The snow was not deep enough to cushion the sound of his boots on the cobbles, but the wind helped. Someone moaned very close at hand and a woman laughed and said, "You really must have hurt him, Lapio. Is he armed?"

"I'm trying to find out," the man named Lapio said. "Here, I'm going through his pockets now." There was a long drawn out whistling sound in the darkness.

"What is it?" the unseen woman asked.

"A fat wallet, Libu. I mean, really fat. These outworlders are all rich, I tell you."

So, Spooner reasoned, the man and the woman were Lagonians making the most of the riots — even as Spooner himself, although an Earthman, would have done. The idea of it suddenly sickened him and he was very glad that Wilma Fuller had come along in

need of help.

He was very close now. He could actually hear the man named Lapio, the Lagonian thief, breathing heavily. It was a rasping sound barely audible above the wind, as if Lapio had an obstruction in his nostrils.

"Well," the woman asked, "have you counted it?"

"In this darkness? Come on, lets get out of here."

"Is he dead, Lapio?"

"No. He moaned a little when I rolled him."

"A Sirian, isn't he?"

"What the hell's the difference whether he's a Sirian or not?"

"I was just wondering."

"What are you prowling around behind me for? Let's go, Libu. Let's get out of here. Libu, I —" Lapio's voice trailed off in a groan as Spooner heard the sound of two hard objects striking. A moment later, Lapio fell in a heap not three strides from Spooner. Despite the gloom, the earthman could make him out now, a huddled form sprawled out on the snow near a second huddled form, the Sirian victim. A slenderer form, the woman hovered nearby for a moment, then kneeled beside Lapio and went over his still form quickly with her hands. She said nothing but merely grunted as she removed something from his clothing and put it in her

own pocket. She was about to get up when Spooner said:

"Don't move, lady. I'm armed. I'll kill you if you move."

THE dark silhouette froze there in front of him. There was a loud intake of breath. "Lapio," the woman said to the unconscious companion who could not hear her. "Lapio, why did I do it? If there had been two of us —"

"Hurry up," Spooner said.

"I'll give you the money, I'll give it to you. Only don't hurt me."

"Stand up straight. Keep your hands high, that's right." Swiftly Spooner went forward and ran his hands impersonally, objectively over her body, searching for a weapon. He found it at her waist, and by its shape and weight decided it was a stunner. Apparently she had reversed it and slugged her companion with the butt end of the hand weapon.

Abruptly the woman said, "Say, wait a minute. You're not armed. You frisked me with both hands. You tried to trick me!"

The thought of it seemed to outrage her. She whirled suddenly on Spooner, a fury of nails and teeth, biting, gouging, kicking. She grappled with him for her stunner and although she possessed unexpected strength for a woman he

could not at first bring himself to hit her. But very close at hand the xanders howled — and that decided Spooner. He lashed out once with his right fist in a short hard blow which snapped the woman's head back while she was still trying to scratch his eyes out. She fell soundlessly across the body of her male companion.

"Spooner!" Wilma screamed.

He ran back to her. "Be quiet, for crying out loud. I'm all right."

"I thought that was you falling. I — I'm sorry."

"I have a stunner. Let's get out of here."

At that moment a voice called out. "Down this way. They're over here. Bring the xanders!"

A pair of xanders howled. Spooner grabbed Wilma's hand and ran.

HALF an hour later she panted "Spooner, I — I'm sorry. No — further. Can't go — further. Got — to — rest."

"We're got to go on. We haven't put enough — listen, don't you hear them?"

"I can hear them, but I can't, I just can't"

Shrugging, Spooner scooped her up and continued running, although much more slowly. She weighed less than he expected and she went completely limp in his

arms, offering no resistance beyond the objective fact of her weight.

Spooner ran in silence for several moments. He did not hear the xanders behind them now — which meant nothing. For the Lagonian xander, Spooner knew, was known to maintain absolute silence in the few moments it took to reach its prey. And the snow, which was deeper now and piled in drifts along the way, would muffle the footfalls of the Lagonian militia.

Without warning, Spooner's feet flew out from under him. He let go of Wilma at once because if they fell together they might both wind up with broken bones. She screamed in a soft, resigned manner and tumbled off into the snow. Spooner thought he had lost his footing on a patch of ice but it did not matter. He alighted on his shoulder and rolled over, grasping the stunner at his belt to make sure he wouldn't lose it. Then he plowed headfirst into a wind-piled embankment of snow and immediately pulled himself free and called Wilma's name.

"I'm over here, Spooner. Are you all right?"

"No bones broken. You?"

"Just shaken up. I want you to know I don't know what would have happened if I tried it alone. I couldn't have even come this far. I'm very grateful."

"Save it. We're not out of this yet."

As if to confirm Spooner's words, one xander howled so close that Spooner thought it was right on top of them. He tugged at the stunner and drew it from his belt. At first he saw nothing but heard the deep-throated growls of the animal. Then he saw its flat yellow eyes in the darkness and barely had time to squeeze the stunner's trigger before the animal's bulk bore him to the snow.

He rolled quickly clear and scrambled to his feet. The xander — six legged and huge of head and as big as a man — was stretched out on the snow. Wilma whimpered. Two stunners awoke the cold dark night with searing streaks of energy but the beams were a dozen feet wide of their mark. Sensory data impinged like that on Spooner — each grim, objective fact isolated, existing by itself and for itself, like a series of staccato tom-tom beats.

"Run for it!" Spooner called, and notched his own stunner to its widest beam and fanned the alleyway with it. His effort was immediately rewarded by screams and shouts of dismay and then he was aware of Wilma running toward him. With their pursuers so close now, she forgot the fact that he had been carrying her until he

fell and ran with him, matching him stride for stride. Her reaction was the only possible one under the circumstances; words were unnecessary — they were running for their lives and both of them knew it.

But they were at a disadvantage. Fresh militiamen joined their pursuers all along the way, untired men who could run more swiftly. This disadvantage, Spooner knew, would prove fatal unless they could do something about it.

The moments fled. The snow fell harder. Twice more Spooner paused, whirled and fell to one knee, fanning the alleyway behind them with his stunner at low intensity. But when he got up to join Wilma the second time, he heard shots ahead of them as well as behind.

They were trapped.

He pulled Wilma toward one side of the narrow, snow-covered street. He groped with her along the wall there until he found a door set in a deep recess in the wall and covered to a depth of three feet by the wind-driven snow. He tried the door but it was locked. He reversed his stunner and pounded the butt on the heavy wood repeatedly.

Behind them, stunner beams criss-crossed in the darkness. Each of the two groups of militia had

evidently fired on its opposite number, giving Spooner and Wilma a reprieve. In the confusion, the militiamen of Lagon might not even be aware which door opened to admit the earthlings.

If any door opened.

SPOONER pounded again. After what seemed a long time, a feeble pulsing light appeared at a window alongside the door and Spooner heard a small bolt snick back out of place. It was not the doorbolt. It belonged, Spooner realized with despair, to a small judas-hole at eye level.

"Well?" the man inside the house barked suspiciously.

"Militia," Spooner mumbled, trying to imitate the Lagonian accents. "We're looking for a pair of earthmen."

"Here? In this house? Begone!"

"Open so we can see for ourselves," Spooner said in crisp, authoritative tones. "If you're not harboring the earthmen you have nothing to fear."

The man cursed him but slid back the great bolt which held the door in place. The door opened in with drifts of snow piling in after it, and Spooner right behind it, and Spooner right behind them, stunner ready.

"Don't worry," he said, as the Lagonian's face lost its purple color and drained almost white.

"Just tell me if there's another way out of here."

He pushed his way inside with Wilma and eased the door shut behind him. "The front," the Lagonian said. "The front way."

"Show us and be quick about it."

Without a word, the Lagonian led them through his dark house and to a door which opened on the next narrow street. He opened the door and waited, eyeing Spooner's stunner. Not another word passed between them. With Wilma, Spooner left the house.

And put a block between them and their pursuers.

"Listen, Spooner," Wilma said. "You never answered this question. Do you think we're going in the right direction?"

"As far as I know, yes. I can't be sure."

"Do we have to keep running?"

"No. But can you keep up this walking pace?" Spooner asked, setting out through the snow with long strides.

"I think so. Yes, I think I can."

"All night?"

"I can try."

"Good girl," Spooner said, and they set off through the snow.

IN the mauve glow of Lagonian dawn-light they could see a mob outside the entrance to the

spaceport. They watched it from far off and Wilma offered Spooner a weak smile. She was almost done in, Spooner knew. She had maintained the pace he set all night and now — apparently reaching safety — they found the mob waiting for them. Still, she could smile.

"We tried," she said. Only two words, but Spooner had never known a girl with such spunk.

"We're still trying," he said. "I've got a Lagonian cloak. I can huddle down in it. I might get away with it."

"And I?"

"You," said Spooner with a grin, "are my prisoner."

"Your prisoner?"

"Come on with me. And act scared. Act more scared than you ever were in your life."

"Act, the man says. I won't be acting."

"Act scared of me."

Together, they walked boldly toward the mob, Spooner cloaking himself in the Lagonian garment and dragging Wilma by the arm. When he reached the fringe of the crowd a Lagonian cried:

"It's an earthgirl. Let's take her!"

"You'll have to kill me first!" Spooner said in Lagonian, his face all but hidden by the cloak and the mauve dawn-light giving a purple tint to his exposed skin.

"She's mine!" Spooner cried loudly. "I caught her and killed her husband and you'll die too, whichever of you tries to take her."

Wilma warmed to her role. She moaned and said: "He's mad. He's beaten me already. I can't go on — anything, anything. Take me. See? All of you. Just so I don't have to stay with him . . ."

"Well now," a voice said, "good for him. That's the way he ought to treat an earthgirl, ain't it, men? Well, ain't it?"

The man who had spoken was big for a Lagonian, almost as big as Spooner. He separated himself from the crowd and ranged himself at Spooner's side. "I'll see you get through, man," he said. "You're doing the right thing, you are."

Spooner mumbled thanks and kept walking. Presently he was in the midst of the mob. He didn't dare look around. An uneasy look would betray him. Wilma, however, could yell and scream and stare with fear-crazed eyes. It was expected of her. Wilma, Spooner thought, was lucky.

They were through most of the mob now, and still walking. Up ahead was the gate of the spaceport, its cyclone wire gleaming in the early morning light. A single guard stood inside the fence. He was armed to the teeth and,

Spooner knew, wouldn't hesitate to use his weapons or summon aid if the mob tried to enter the spaceport but would remain neutral as long as the mob remained on its side of the fence. The mob, for its part wasn't foolish enough to tangle with extra-Lagonians on interstellar territory.

Two dozen yards to go, thought Spooner. He could almost feel the menace in the air all about him. A dozen yards. Wilma was sobbing now, for the benefit of the Lagonians . . .

Something clutched Spooner's cape. He tried to reclip it, but was holding Wilma's one hand and had his other hand, hidden by the folds of the garment, on the butt of the stunner.

His cape fell to the ground.

"An earthman!"

"We've been tricked!"

"Kill him. Kill both of them —"

Grabbing Wilma's upper arm, Spooner bulled his way forward through the mob. He could see the guard at the gate cheering him on but doing nothing to help him. It was a boundary line rigidly adhered to by both sides.

Spooner whirled and fired his stunner blindly on its widest, non-lethal beam. A dozen figures collapsed and fell but a dozen others took their places. Hands clawed at Spooner, tried to drag him down.

He fought them off. Wilma kicked and struck out with her free arm, fighting for her life.

A face blurred in front of Spooner. He clubbed at it with his forearm and it seemed to dissolve in a red smear. Another face. A mouth, yawning at him. A scream —

He fought blindly, desperately. There were too many of them to tackle him effectively. They screamed and cursed and got in each other's way.

"Here. Right here, sir!" the guard shouted.

Spooner looked. The gate was ajar. A pair of hands reached out for him, but he struck them down. Someone — a Lagonian woman — clutched at Wilma's arm but Wilma shook her loose. Spooner hit another man, then used the butt of the spent stunner as a weapon. There were cries of rage and pain, a welling, rising, frothing wail of madness and indignation, a pushing, seething wall of flesh — and then nothing. "

THE gate slammed shut behind them across the fresh-fallen snow. During the night, the sky had cleared. It was a cold bright, brittle bright morning. The guard was beaming. The mob knew better than to storm the interstellar airport. They shook their fists and

cursed but remained on the other side of the fence.

"Tired?" Spooner asked Wilma. "Exhausted."

"We'll get you a car, sir," the guard said.

"Do you want a car?" Spooner asked Wilma.

"Not if we have to wait, I don't."

Spooner nodded happily. Together they trotted across the snow toward the apron of the runway and toward the blasting pit beyond it, where the starship pointed its gleaming silver needle at the sky.

"You're coming with me?" Wilma asked.

"I'm coming with you."

"But you —"

"A guy can change his mind, can't he?"

"But why —"

"Because I want to get to know you better, Wilma. Is that reason good enough?"

She said it was good enough as they reached the office of the spaceport. She was flushed with the running and the cold but looked very beautiful. Spooner had a hunch he would get to know her very much better indeed before the long trip to earth ended.

THE END



Space Radio



EVEN in its infancy space travel will make use of radio communication. Perhaps the first installation will involve only rocket-to-satellite, or rocket-to-Earth, or rocket-to-Moon links, but radio will be there. The theory has been worked out in detail. It will not differ much in application from present day short-wave and radar communication.

The enormous (by Terran standards) distances introduce a minor problem. Radio waves will not be allowed to spread out as on Earth, but will be focused into tight, narrow beams, a concentration of energy. This will be done by using reflector "dishes" and "bowls" of the parabolic variety similar to radar antennas. In this way most of the energy sent, may be received.

At first Morse code will be favored, for even the feeblest signals can be picked up when they consist

of dots and dashes. And Morse code can be carried on in "pulsed" shots of radio energy, so relatively small radio transmitters can momentarily deliver surprisingly large bursts of energy. This is much the way present-day radar transmitters work. An interesting and somewhat amusing point to be considered is the time-lag between messages. At 186,000 miles per second, even radio waves take time to travel interplanetary distances. When communications take place over a million miles or more, you have to wait for an answer!

The encouraging thing about interplanetary radio is that the equipment we use today with very slight modifications can also be used in the future when men do get into space. In fact, in all aspects of space travel, we're just about ready except for that one vital item—the rocket ship itself.



"... the only trace of civilization . . . seems to be some sort of well."

Leonard Coffin followed the newlyweds to the asteroid with one purpose in mind. He would kill them if they resisted, for he had decided —

This Treasure Is Mine!

by

Paul W. Fairman

Illustrated by Kelly Freas

HIS tired, blood shot eyes gazed with satisfaction on the strange dumbbell-shape of the asteroid Eros. For three sleepless days and nights he had followed the larger spaceship as a tiny darting pip on the radar screen of his own overage one-man cruiser. And now — destination Eros. For a time it had seemed as if the universe had lost its very existence, dissolved by the magic of radar and his own savage desire to pursue into the tiny energy pip.

With a tired triumphant smile he brought his ship down. So it was Eros. He had known it was one of the asteroids but a whole Army of men might have grown old searching out the particular one. Eros — and treasure trove.

As his ship made touchdown three or four rock-strewn miles from the larger vessel, he was already discounting any resistance he

might encounter. They were just a couple of kids, he thought. Newlyweds who wouldn't have a chance against a seasoned spacehound.

He had to hand it to them, though. His name was Leonard Coffin and he thought that if he ever married — which was doubtful — he too would spend his honeymoon in search of a treasure potentially worth more than all the money which had ever been minted on Earth or in the solar system.

You had to hand it to those kids, Coffin thought again— but they didn't have a chance.

For the girl he felt a strange, almost morbid fondness. He was going to kill her, and that brand new husband of hers. Still, he had watched her grow up. It almost seemed as if he had spent all his adult life watching her grow up, waiting, hoping. She knows, he had



thought. Her old man got a message through before he died. It's in trust for her. When she grows up she'll go hunting for the treasure. It's in her blood.

It was the treasure, so the legend went, of a hoary civilization which had died when a planet between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter had been blown asunder while the dinosaurs reigned on Earth. The girl's father — Leonard Coffin's space-buddy for five years on the grueling asteroid run of a small charter and freight company — had found the treasure and had died soon after. Cause and effect — like the curse of King Tut's tomb? Coffin didn't think so. Harry Burress had died in a normal enough space accident.

Licking his lips, Coffin climbed into a spacesuit. Taking no chance, he belted both an interior and an exterior blaster, then wondered if Harry Burress' daughter and her husband were taking similar precautions. He laughed softly because he knew it was unlikely. They did not know they had been followed. They suspected nothing.

Having adjusted his spacesuit, Coffin regulated the air pressure to account for a lack of pressure on the airless twenty mile long slab of rock called Eros. Eros, he thought. God of love. That was a laugh. He wondered what the god of love

would think if he knew his namesake world was being visited by a man ready to commit murder for the possession of an enigmatic treasure.

For only Helen Holmes — nee Burress — knew what the treasure of Eros was. All Coffin knew was its legendary value. A value which was said to transcend money.

Coffin let himself out of the small spaceship's airlock and stalked across the twisted, broken terrain of Eros. One purpose held his mind now, flooding to the very core of his being. The treasure. He wanted it. He would kill for it as cheerfully as he had spent a decade and a half watching Helen Burress grow up. He would get it.

With tireless steps Coffin approached the larger — but still small — spaceship. He saw the ridiculous name painted on its prow — *Light O' Love*. He wondered if Helen and her husband had disembarked yet. He decided to wait and see.

When he had waited the better part of an hour, he cursed himself as a fool and plodded on toward the *Light o' Love*. He circled the teardrop-shaped ship twice before he found what he was looking for. Then, getting down awkwardly on hands and knees in the cumbersome spacesuit, he found their foot-

prints in the soft pumice. Two sets of footprints, heading off in a perfectly straight line toward the low ridge on the incredibly close western horizon, toward the fangs of twin peaks which seemed to bite at the black sky from the very center of the ridge.

Footprints in a straight line. Coffin smiled and followed them. No aimless wandering for Helen and her husband. They knew exactly where they were going.

And now — so did Coffin.

THE horizon was somewhat further than Coffin had imagined, a trick probably played by Eros' dumbbell-shape. And when he finally did reach the twin peaks he discovered that they were not part of the jagged ridgeline. Instead, they were several hundred yards beyond it.

When Coffin reached the ridge, he grew suddenly alarmed. The trail disappeared in the last of the pumice at the base of the small escarpment.

Coffin grinned a moment later and called himself a fool. You're edgy and you don't know it, he thought. They set out this way with utterly no hesitation. They haven't stopped once, not according to the footprints. If they were that certain of where they were going, it would have to be a landmark you couldn't miss. And the only land-

mark which qualified was the twin peak beyond the escarpment.

Congratulating himself on the precision of his logic, Coffin sought a trail up the ridge and soon found it. He was willing to bet that Helen and her husband had taken the same trail not many minutes before.

He scrambled up over the ridge in a surprisingly short time because he first reduced the gravity in his spacesuit. Probably, he thought, the kids were dog tired. Probably they had neglected to do that. Well, he thought, when you've been knocking around as long as I have, you learn to use every trick in the book.

Nimble, almost weightless, Coffin went bouncing down the other side of the ridge. Then, carefully, he readjusted the gravity in his suit to Earth-norm. If he didn't and it came to a fight, the kids would have been able to throw him around like a bouncing rubber ball.

Coffin reached the twin peaks and stopped. They were no more than several hundred feet high but on Eros that was plenty. At their base they extended for perhaps a hundred yards from north to south. There were footprints in the pumice between the ridge and the peaks but at the base of the ridge they disappeared again.

Up the peaks?

No, Coffin thought. There was nothing up there.

Slowly he began to circle at the base of the peaks, looking for the entrance to a cave. Traditionally, he thought with an out-of-place grin, treasure were always found in caves, weren't they?

What Coffin found was far more surprising than the entrance to a cave. Exactly half way around the base of the twin peaks was an enormous rectangular prism as black as the starless sky above Coffin's head. He had not been able to see the huge block of a structure because its longer side was in a line with Helen's spaceship and the ridge and the twin peaks. Its narrower dimension — certainly no more than fifty or sixty feet at most — was effectively hidden by the base of the twin peaks.

Carefully, Coffin studied what he saw. Here, without doubt, was the treasure. Here — inside the blockhouse. With his eyes only (there would be time for pacing later, if necessary) Coffin estimated the dimensions of the prism. It was at least two hundred yards long eighty or a hundred feet high and perhaps fifty in width. It was black with the true lusterless blackness of deep space but was silhouetted clearly against space because even in Eros' day sky the stars gleamed.

Coffin did not need a guidebook to know that Helen and her husband had entered the prism.

He circled it once and then once again. On his third trip around, he began to curse himself. He should have really dogged their footsteps. He should have been right behind them. There was an entrance somewhere, all right. There had to be an entrance. It had swallowed Helen and her husband utterly — but perhaps that was because they knew what to look for.

Coffin didn't know. He could only wish . . .

A rectangle of white light glowed on the long side of the prism. Gawking, Coffin ran toward it. Suddenly, vaguely, he was afraid. Surely a rectangular prism with these considerable dimensions would have been seen or at least photographed on one of the Earth government asteroid survey ships. And surely an entrance aglow with white light would have been discovered by Coffin on one of his earlier walks around the prison . . .

A structure which could not be and a doorway which abruptly was —

To hell with riddles, Coffin thought all at once. And plunged inside the prism.

IT was empty as the space between the stars is empty, except

for a single small pedestal in its very center and the two figures near the pedestal. They were not wearing their spacesuits, Coffin observed. Did the strange glow at the entranceway somehow keep air and pressure within the prism? Apparently, he decided, and deflated his own suit. A moment later he climbed out of it without a sound and approached the two figures standing mutely near the pedestal.

When he was quite close he unsheathed his blaster. Metal squeaked against leather and the two figures whirled.

"Mr. Coffin!" the girl cried.

Her voice echoed, seemed to be lost it vast distances. She was ansper and pretty as Coffin had remembered her, with auburn hair and a figure which would draw whistles and an inquisitive-looking face with a small turned up nose and large bold blue eyes. But her looks meant nothing to Coffin. He catalogued them as he might catalogue the terrain of Eros. He wanted only the treasure.

The small golden cube atop the pedestal?

It seemed almost anticlimactic. It was hardly bigger than a man's head and even if it were solid gold it wouldn't be worth more than a few score thousand dollars.

The man turned too. He was hardly more than a boy, Coffin

saw, with a scrubbed handsome earnestness to match Helen's own. He looked puzzled now as Helen said:

"I don't understand this, Will. It's an old friend of father's. He must have followed us . . ."

"I followed you," Coffin said.

"What do you want?" the man named Will asked.

"Exactly what you want," Coffin told him. "Exactly what you want."

"You were my father's friend," Helen said. "If he told you about the treasure before he died, why did you wait until now to claim it? Unless—" suddenly she smiled—"unless Dad wanted you to share it with us. Of course, that would be different. If it were Dad's wish, I'll abide by it."

The thought was tempting, and Coffin played with it. Tempting—but not acceptable. Why settle for one third when you can have it all? he thought. Helen wouldn't understand that. But Helen and I, Coffin thought, have led too very different lives.

"Helen," Will said. "The man isn't listening to you. It's nothing like that at all. Don't you see he's holding a blaster on us?"

"The treasure," Coffin said. "Is it here? Is it on the pedestal?"

Slowly, Helen nodded. She stared at the blaster in Coffin's

hand and then — longer — at his face. Her eyes became watery and she said, "You're going to kill us. Aren't you?"

"The treasure," Coffin repeated.

"Yes, of course it's here. The treasure."

"Helen! Don't tell him: at least make him find it for himself."

"He couldn't miss it now, Will."

"But he—"

"Tell me, Mr. Coffin, did my father confide in you?"

COFFIN shook his head. "We were friends. We had been through a lot together, but I might have expected it. Blood, you know. Blood is thicker than water. So he told you, not me."

"You're a lonely man, Mr. Coffin, aren't you? I actually feel sorry for you."

"Don't feel sorry for me. Feel sorry for yourselves. Because I'm going to get the treasure, while you —"

"All right," Helen said. Suddenly she was quite calm and it surprised Coffin. "We're not going to get the treasure, Will and I. In a way I'm almost glad. It might have been too grave a responsibility for us — and for mankind."

"What the devil are you talking about?" Coffin almost shouted. "Do you think I'm going to share what I find with mankind? With

anyone? Don't make me laugh,"

"Oh yes," Helen went on. "I feel sorry for you. You don't even know what the treasure of Eros is. Do you?"

"I'll find out. You won't."

"But I already know."

Coffin looked at the gold globe atop the pedestral, then at the girl. "O. K. Now tell me."

"The globe is merely a way of entrance. You twist it and a section of floor slides back — and there you are."

"Where am I?"

"The people who lived on the planet of which Eros is but a tiny part," Heler said as if she were reciting words her father had told her fifteen years ago, "must have been living on a dead or dying world which couldn't supply them with foodstuffs or building materials. They put all their great science into one project, and you see it here before you."

"But what?" Coffin cried. "What is it?"

"A matter reproducer. It will make anything, literally. Out of nothing, out of the energy latent in the void of space, it will produce matter. Food, steel, fuel —"

"Gold!" Coffin said. "Or jewels or anything. I see. I see —"

"No, you don't see. It was never meant for anyone like you. Don't you realize what an instrument for

good such a device could be? No more starvation anywhere, for anyone. Wealth, for all the worlds. Plenty — for everyone. That's what a dead civilization offers us, Mr. Coffin."

"That's not what it offers me. I'm sorry. Helen. I'm sorry we simply cannot understand one another. It's why I'll have to kill you, of course."

Helen looked at her husband. "Will," she said. She spoke his name softly and there were tears in her eyes. "Oh, Will. I'm not afraid to die, but I love you. I love you and I haven't had time —"

Before Coffin could stop him, Will leaned suddenly against the golden globe. Coffin snarled a warning but before he finished there was a grinding sound and a square trap slid open almost at Coffin's feet. Its sudden yawning made him giddy and he staggered slightly on the lip of the pit.

Shouting, he began to turn around with his blaster. But Will leaped at him and shoved with both hands.

For a moment which seemed to stretch into eternity Coffin hovered on the brink of the trap. Then slowly, reluctantly, he fell in.

"Quick!" Will cried. "There's a flight of steps down there. We've got to get out of here before he

climbs up. He'll kill us if he can get his hands on us!"

COFFIN heard those words and heard their pounding footsteps. Slowly, groggily, he climbed the gleaming, polished stairs. They were dustless, ageless. They spoke of an alien culture which — if it produced the rectangular prism which only seemed visible at times and the entrance appeared without warning — could also conceivably produce what Helen had spoken of. A matter reproducer. To make — anything. Anything, Coffin thought. And it's mine.

He didn't climb the entire staircase. Suddenly, all at once, he was smiling. Why go after them. Why bother? He had planned to kill them because he thought they wouldn't give up the treasure. Now, though, things were different. They had seemed so undecided about the treasure anyway, as if their attitude was almost one of good riddance. Well then, good riddance!

And Coffin turned and went down the stairs again.

It was a small vault of a room, completely square. There was a narrow passageway at its farther end and Coffin, blaster in hand, made his way to this.

As he entered it, a voice spoke in his mind:

"Halt, you who are about to enter the crypt!"

Coffin stopped dead in his tracks, realized the voice — if voice it was — had spoken in the soundless syllables of his mind.

"Halt — unless you are ready for the treasure ahead of you, unless you are beyond greed, beyond evil. Only then go on."

Shrugging, Coffin continued walking. They couldn't scare him with a telepathic recording, although it was eerie. But such things were being developed on Earth, even now.

"If you hear this message," the silent, age-old voice went on, "then ours is a dead world. We only hope that the science which couldn't save us from a destruction we hope you never have to face will be able to aid you, whoever, whatever you are.

"But — a final warning. The matter reproducer is triggered now for only one response. You cannot change the mechanism. You can only accept its first gift — which, however, will prevent any further action on your part if you are unfit.

"Are you sure —"

The voice droned on, but now Coffin was smiling. It was a bluff. He could picture Helen and her husband. They would have fled from the voice, as they had fled from Coffin. Weak people . . . Be-

cause if there was power behind the voice, it wouldn't have bothered to warn Coffin —

The passageway opened suddenly on an enormous cavern of a room. Coffin could not even estimate its size but saw that it was completely empty except for a platform which seemed to be in its dead center.

Smiling, almost laughing out loud, Coffin ran toward the platform.

A matter reproducer, which, once Coffin mastered it, would manufacture anything out of thin air. He savoured the word. Anything, anything, anything . . .

He stopped at the base of the platform and studied it. There was a shuddering sensation, then, and Coffin fell. At first he thought it had come from the cavern, but then he realized it was only Helen's spaceship blasting off.

Coffin scrambled to his feet and looked warily at the platform. It seemed harmless enough, but it could have been booby-trapped. You never knew.

Carefully, Coffin unfolded the deflated spacesuit which he had carried under his arm. He tossed it on the platform and held his breath, waiting.

When nothing happened, Coffin smiled triumphantly and mounted the platform himself.

The floor glowed. Somewhere an ancient engine whined. Coffin screamed in sudden fear, but no one heard him — yet.

Then, as if by magic, the walls spewed men. They came tumbling toward the platform from all directions, hundreds of them, it seemed, in the indistinct light.

The guardians of the place, Coffin thought with wild alarm. Sleeping, waiting

He climbed down from the platform and squinted toward the mobs approaching him, squinted because light glowed behind them but the light was indistinct, hazy, around them.

Coffin raised both hands. "I come in peace!" he cried.

There were shouts and pounding of feet. One of the indistinct men

shouted: "He's bluffing. I know his type."

The man spoke English — in a deadly familiar voice.

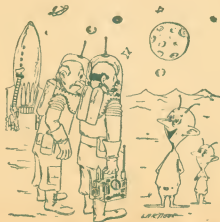
All at once, the glow faded, the lighting around Coffin became brighter, clearer.

The chamber had filled with men, with thousands of them. Coffin looked at them—and screamed.

The first gift will prevent any further action on your part if you are unfit —

They would never trust Coffin. And he would never trust them. He would watch them as carefully as they would watch him — until they all died.

But Coffin wondered what the next explorer to reach Eros would do when he was confronted by — ten thousand Leonard Coffins.



"How does it happen you people speak English?"

Letters from the Readers

CLIMBING LIKE A JET!

Dear Bill Hamling:

As reader Brandt put it in the letter section of the January issue of TALES, your mag is climbing like a jet fighter! Your ideas about how an sf magazine should be run, are, for the most part, sound; with a little luck IMAGINATION and IMAGINATIVE TALES should go far!

Particularly good in the January TALES are the colored illos. The sharply defined two color combinations have it all over black and white. I have always maintained that a good illo helps a reader enjoy a good story—and yours certainly did this time!

By the way, new artist Lloyd Rognan gets my vote of confidence also, but I'm glad to see McCauley back on the cover too. His cover is a perfect gem of art—though for the life of me I can't see where it depicts a scene from Geoff St. Reynard's novel, THE COSMIC BUNGLERS. Nowhere in the entire story was anything said about

the burning of a large city, and no red cylinders with snake-like arms showed up. Wot gives?

Speaking of THE COSMIC BUNGLERS, I thought it was great. Much better than last issue's novel by Ray Palmer. It combined the best elements of serious science, profound thought and exciting adventure, making for the best action novel I've read in quite awhile. If this is what you meant by saying you are changing to science fiction adventure—brother, I'm with you!

Milton Lesser disappointed me with his CODE OF THE BLUSTER WORLD, but a couple of new authors (Granger and Thames) really took up the slack. A DAY FOR BATTLE is the best thing Thames has done outside of his Johnny Mayhem series in AMAZING, and Granger did an equally fine job on his THE GIRL FROM NOWHERE. Keep printing stories by the younger writers, as they are the best bet for science fiction.—In evidence, just look at what Chad Oliver, Philip Dick, Bob Sheckley,

Charles Beaumont, and Poul Anderson are doing. Compare this with established names like Van Vogt, Heinlein, and Kuttner, who are content to rest on their laurels. If we depended solely on these "masters" to turn out new science fiction for us, the prozines would be in bad shape!

Kenn Curtis
4722 Peabody Ave.
Cincinnati 27, Ohio

Glad you like the addition of color to our two science fiction magazines, Kenn. Just one of the many improvements you'll be noting as we go along. You're right about Granger and Thames. They're a couple of sharp young men and writers to watch. For that matter, you'll be seeing a great deal of new talent in our pages from now on. "Masters"? The boys we're developing won't take a back seat to anyone—wait and see . . . Yep, that's what we meant by action science fiction. A perfect example is Dwight Swain's novel this issue. More coming up! wh

SCIENTIFILM FAN

Dear Ed:

In September of last year I first discovered SCIENTIFILM MARQUEE in the October issue of IMAGINATION. I was very pleased as I am extremely interested in science fiction films. Then the December IMAGINATION had a very interesting review of stf films in the FANDORA'S BOX column.

Now, today I bought the January issue of TALES and discovered that featured in the issue was a new SCIENTIFILM MARQUEE

—and the news that it would be a regular feature.

Well sir, what I want to know is if SCIENTIFILM MARQUEE will also run in IMAGINATION, or whether you've switched the department permanently to TALES. Not that I'm complaining—each magazine has its share of fine features.

Douglas Kraham
4518 Stanford St.
Houston 6, Texas

You've guessed it, Doug, we decided to switch SCIENTIFILM MARQUEE to TALES as a permanent feature. In IMAGINATION we've got FANDORA'S BOX regularly, so we figured we'd give TALES a regular department too—in addition to other regular features like the editorial, reader's section, etc. We don't want to overload one magazine with departments at the expense of the other. A balanced diet. wh

ACTION POLICY OKAY

Dear Bill:

Have been going to write you for quite some time but have just now gotten around to it.

At last, an editor with enough on the ball to put color back into science fiction magazines! It belongs there and adds a certain prestige to the magazines carrying it. Meaning, of course, *Madge* and *Tales*.

You know, I've heard a lot of yakking from Ray Palmer that he can still write good stf stories. I'd begun to believe it was a lot of malarkey until you printed his METAL EMPEROR in the Novem-

fiction magazines on the stands.

My favorite story in the issue was Philip Dick's *PSI-MAN HEAL MY CHILD*. Dick is one of my favorite writers and this new yarn didn't let me down.

Right on its heels was Bob Silverberg's *YOKEL WITH PORTFOLIO*. If Silverberg keeps up the improvement he'll be one of my favorites too.

The other yarns were real good too. John Christopher's *MANNA*, and Alan Nourse's short piece. In short, an all-star issue with the exception of the lead novel.

Let's have more covers by Lloyd Rognan and, of course, McCauley.

Joel Huber
170 E. 81st St.
New York, N. Y.

That newsstand strike was a real ulcer producer, believe us! We had the November TALES sitting in warehouses in the East for well over a month. It's a good thing the magazine is bi-monthly or we'd never have gotten a crack at on sale! Anyway, we breathed a long sigh of relief when the strike ended, and we're glad you finally were able to get your copy. (This was

the first time we had two issues on sale simultaneously—the November issue in the New York area, and the January issue elsewhere!) More Rognan and McCauley on tap. wh

HAPPY BLAST-OFFS

Dear Mr. Hamling:

The January issue of *TALES* was another hit—keep it up and the magazine will surpass *Madge*!

The novel, *THE COSMIC BUNG-LEERS* was marvelous—action to the last word. The other stories were equally enjoyable and fast-paced.

I enjoyed Ackerman's *SCIENTI-FILM MARQUEE* — apparently there will be quite a few good films to see soon.—Saw "Target Earth" last night—pretty good film in case you haven't seen it yet.

W. C. Brandt
Apt. N

1725 Seminary Ave.
Oakland 21, Cal

We'll keep up the fast pace! In the meantime, gang, turn the page and send us your subscription . . . See you next issue . . . wh

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INTRODUCING the Author

★ *A. Bertram Chandler* ★

(Concluded From Page 2)

China, Japan, the Philippines and the Dutch East Indies. During this period I began to write — mainly light verse and humorous articles for English magazines. I was, however, a science fiction addict as far as my reading was concerned, having become that way through a chance reading of Wells' *THE TIME MACHINE*.

Finally, somewhat browned off by service in tramp steamers, I came ashore for a spell, working as tally clerk, kennelman and shipping clerk until I was offered a position in a first class liner company on the Australasian trade, joining them as Fourth Officer. During the war the Company's ships ran to many ports well off the beaten track, and it was during a visit to New York that I met Mr. John W. Campbell, visiting him as a Faithful Reader. As a result of this meeting my first s/f story — *THIS MEANS WAR* — was written, and published in *ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION*.

It was during the war, too, that for about two years I was Armaments Officer of one of our passenger liners serving as a troop trans-

port, and was very enthusiastic about the various rocket weapons brought into use during that period. I regret, however, to have to state that rockets never behaved for me, and that every time that I fired one (or a full salvo) the results were such as to cause more alarm to us than to the enemy.

In spite of the mutual distrust between myself and rockets I am a Fellow of the British Interplanetary Society and am looked upon by all and sundry in the Company's service as the local expert on astronautics, and at times get rather tired of answering that classic question: "Yes, but what does it push *against*?"

At the present time I am Chief Officer of a passenger liner on the run between the U. K. and Australia and New Zealand and, consequently, do not have as much time for writing as I would wish. Sea experience, however, is invaluable for my own particular brand of space opera — after all, it takes a sound knowledge of ships to be able to write convincingly about spaceships!

—*A Bertram Chandler*



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